

SAILOR'S SONG

James Hanley

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OUR TIME IS GONE

HALF AN EYE

BETWEEN THE TIDES

GREY CHILDREN

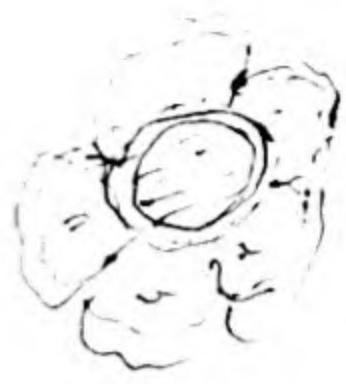
HOLLOW SEA

PEOPLE ARE CURIOUS

THE OCEAN

NO DIRECTIONS

AT BAY



SAILOR'S SONG

FOR
E. M. FORSTER
(A Salute to Integrity)

JAMES HANLEY

SAILOR'S SONG

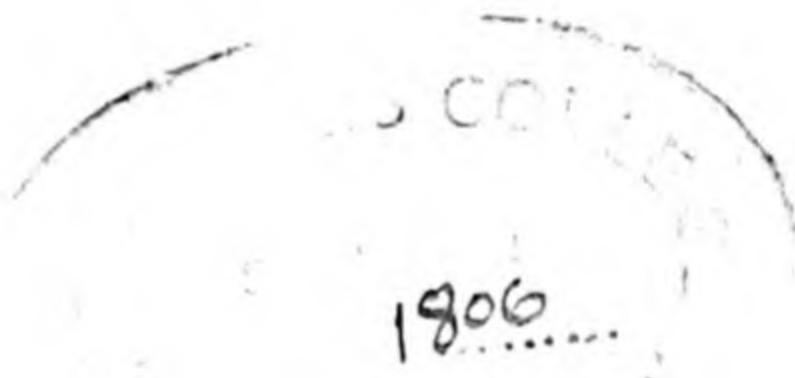


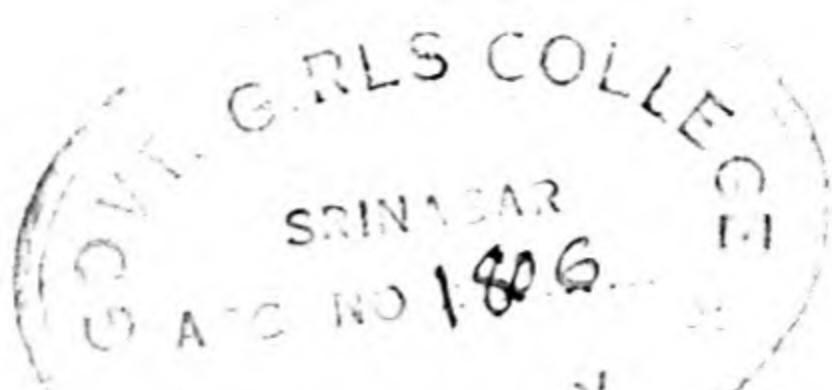
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SAILOR'S SONG

CHAPTER I

"Cover my face," he said.

"Take it easy," one said.

"Cover it up."

"Cool man, cool," another said.

"Cover my face up," I said. "I said cover my face up. Don't want to see any more sea."

They looked at him, they said nothing, they went their ways.

He looked up at deck-head, counted a thousand rivets, felt weight of steel. One felt her lurch, one clutched at wood, stroked this, like it were a sudden friend to him, warmth rising out of it, one counted some minutes by his watch. A shout, then many fragments of the same shout, like these were scattering frenzies.

"Going down, she's going down."

"No more sea," he said. "Don't want to see any more sea."

"She's going . . ."

"Down!"

Ship heaved and sea heaved, and there were sounds in the heaves.

Sing a song, ship cried, sing a song, sailor, cried sea.

Sing as I go down, sing as I heave up.

One watched this sailor toss, one heard creak of wire, one thought, "Oh, the sea will cover his face."

One journey was ended, now begin another. Each heave of the sea cried this, each lurch of ship, each long, more dreadful lurch.

"Finished," he said, breathed fetid air.

One went out.

"Done with," he shouted, blood spurting then.

Another went by.

"You'll go with us," the last one said.

He stood there, he meant to stay, to watch, to take this sailor out. End one journey, then begin another. Remember one, think of another. Watching this sailor toss his face was sad, sad as he remembered. The blow was hard, struck hard, quicker than lightning flash. Lashed to bars and rope this journey begins. Step by step grope, through maze and mesh, air deluged by ash, steam tearing up, scalding, tearing up, through mesh of steel, all that power was, and all that power proclaimed, struck down at a blow, jungle where order was, crazy gestures of steel.

Bring him through this, across a floor moving, alive and moving, moves with the sea's heave. And then to a ladder.

Think of a man lashed, by bar and rope, ease him up sure, gently, and still sure, way out at the top. Grope step by step, men turned to bats.

The strain on muscle told, hold hard for breath. Climbing, still climbing, up, up. From darkness to light, up to a world, oh, breathe that air in, breathe horror out. Slow and yet sure, groping and groping again.

Careful one says. Easy now one says. He got it bad, one says.

Think of light, think only of light.

Spirally this ladder went, crazily high, rest on steel-landings, then climb again. Look back below, all ended below. Step by step up, moan climb on moan. Bear up Jack, one says, steady another cries, nearly there, the third said.

Listen now, one says, I heard, another said, almost there cried the third.

Listened to the sea roar, wind wild around it. Smelt air come down, lungs opened wide, breathe it all in, breathe horror out. Climb and yet climb.

"Can't hear nothing 'cept sea," one cried, "Nor can I," said another.

"What *will* we hear?" said the third. So saying this he took added weight, knew the others were strained.

Many men's voices can be drowned by a sea.

He tossed and stretched there, iron bunk creaking.

Felt weight of steel, counting rivets by thousands, stared up at deck-head,

"All over," he said. "Want to see no more sea."

The third man went out. Voices came in on the heel of wind.

He heard a word, "Go!" He heard a word, "Raft."

They came into the foc'sle then, he watched and counted as they came.

Three men and known, every inch of the way known, through nerve and bone, tested by days and tested by seas, all sailors three.

"One journey ended, another begins," one said.

One behind him was silent, but thought, "Now where will it end?"

The third one came up, his face bore resolve.

"Pick him up gently," he cried, against incoming wind, loud sound of seas.

This ship was no man's ship, this ship was sea's ship. Leave her now. Leave her, oh leave a ship that belongs to a sea.

They bore him up, from creaking bunk, they trod clumsily out. Eyes met hard light, many a league of sea. They moved slow towards her rail.

"Cover my face," he said. "Want to see no more sea."

"Struck hard and quick," one said, and one was silent, but the third said, "Who struck hard and quick would strike in hell."

Ship heaved hard over, sea was a hill, high hill, and racing, they held on hard.

"I tell you I don't want to see any more sea."

Not one would speak, they were watching this sea. "Never lower in this," one said, another nodded his head. "I'll shut my eyes when we throw," the third said, looking at this one bound, lashed by bar and rope, "God forsaken that throw might be."

All three were strained, they lifted him up, they watched the horizon line.

"Hurl away. I want no more sea," they heard him say.

Their answer was silence, they raised him yet higher, then they closed eyes, and then they hurled him into a sea. Sea closed him in, one journey was ended, begin another, and this began. Down far, then up again, tossing in this sea.

"O.K." cried one, jumped clean from her rail.

"Hold hard to him," cried another, jumped down to a sea.

"Coming," the third said, leapt clear of her rail.

Each swam towards this man, in the heaving sea, they were bearing him up.

"Raft!"

"There!"

"Where?"

"Swim to it."

"O.K. by me. You follow."

One swam towards this raft, then clutched, held. He paused for wind, he climbed aboard. He watched for the others, and struggling they came. Struggling drew nearer, struggling they got him on, painfully followed, stood but a moment, not a word spoken, all three fell flat. They lay, still.

The bound one still cried out against sight of sea, cried for the cloth to cover his face, but none could hear, and none moved. They lay, motionless, only a sea could move.

The heaving mass, where could it bear them?

A roar roused them up, a roar made them move.

They struggled up, they saw, they watched her go, no man's ship, they watched her go down.

"She's gone!"

"Gone!"

One song was ended, begin another. Sing sailor, cried sea, sing a song, sailor, sing a song.

"I'm gone," cried the ship.

"I'm yet here," cried a sea. "Sing a song, sailor, sing a song."

Washed over one bound, washed over those three, flat on their backs. Let sky yawn down, and let the sea heave, let that one cry out against it, and against sight of it, no man could move. One journey ended, one begun.

"Sing a song, sailor."

"Flat on our backs?" cried one.

"Sing a song flat on your backs," cried the sea. "Sing, sailor, sing."

Washing over them, washing under them, pressing ship down, pressing men down.

The bound one was still, brain rivet-filled, eye refusing that sky, saw nothing but steel, felt the weight of it, felt the heat of it, somewhere below, far down below, in a big shell, in a steel shell, mouth gobbling ash. He closed eyes as they looked down at him. Nothing you could do. You could lie still, you could think, you could say things, but when you looked at him, hard bound and fast, by bar and rope, you knew there was nothing you could do but watch a sea.

"Won't last long."

"Tough!"

"Ssh! He can hear you."

"Cover my bloody face, mate. I want no more sea," crying out bound, this one was lost.

"I want to laugh, but I won't," one said, "that man never saw no sea. Who sees a sea so far down below? I could laugh, but I won't." Saying this he pressed a hard flat over his mouth.

"End one journey, begin another; oh, where do we go from here?"

"Where?"

"He's moving, look!"

They crawled, they dragged over to him, first looked to see lashings fast, then looked hard at him.

"Cover my face right up," he cried at them.

"Dreamin'," one said.

"I can't sing," the lashed one said.

"Never asked you to sing, no man asked you to sing."

"Who did?"

"God knows, I don't."

"He's still dreamin'."

Sing a song, sailor, cried sea, sing a song.

"There! Hear that?"

"Heard nothing."

"Neither did I."

"Listen then," he cried, rivets dancing in his brain, "listen then."

"We're listenin', and we hear nothing."

"Then cover me up."

"Can't."

"Leave him alone, he's just dreamin'."

Raft heaved and sea heaved; they left him then.

Sing a song, sailor, sing a song.

"Listen," one said. "There," cried another. "Ah, he's dreamin'," said the third.

And then they were listening.

Sing a song, sailor, oh sing a song. And then they were watching him.

"Delirious," one said.

"One of them voices inside him," said another.

"Hell! Let him sing, then," shouted the third, curled up like a cat.

CHAPTER II

O.K. by me, sirs, I'll sing a song. A long one or a short one, a thin one or a fat one, a loud one or a soft one, I can sing a song, sirs. O.K. by me.

Then sing a song, sailor, cried sea, then sing a song.

O.K. by me, sirs, I'll sing a song.

I know a river, know a sea, know where oceans are. Knew this before eye saw them, in the bone, sirs, felt it in the bone. Nine at the time, smelt it off my father. Hear him come along,

I'd hear him come along, sprawling walk he had, wasn't a tread, never a tread to that man, sirs, no sailor can tread. Sea sees to that, what makes a sea wild sees to that, and the heave and ho of any ship.

Look out of a window now, and there he is, smell sea every time he comes home. Dream about whales while he's home, nine years I was. At ten I saw a sea.

Watched her from a window, flat and sly to-day, like a lake is, cunning like that, watched that sea, thought of whales, fumed against a high hill, I wanted to go. Go to a sea. Eleven I was then. Saw my father go, watched hard, thought again of whales, waited, he never came back.

Grew to twelve, thirteen, still watched that sea. Knew her, every move of her, every nerve, wasn't always flat, wasn't always sly, lovely some days, you'd fling yourself at her, that lovely she was. Went on watching. Went on feeling in a bone, couldn't take my eyes off that sea, sirs.

And while I was watching her, my mother watched me. Yes, sirs, watched hard, watched close and constant, see her eyes now, big and sad eyes, wonder in pools there, watching me. Felt a strain coming on me, it was her strain, deep down, feel it all, every bit of it. Then sudden there came another one, knew what this was. She was pulling, pulling, God she was pulling with a world's weight this sea was. I watched, and I went on watching.

Never grew too big, never remained too small, and then I got it quick, and then I had it. Got it off my father, his smell all over me. Held me in, hung on hard, my father's smell, sea breathing all over me.

Looked harder at that sea, knew her every inch, I'll sail over that sea, I said. She knew I'd go, she watched it come, not sudden, not overwhelming, just slow, grown sure like that, oh more sure than that again.

She knew, oh, that strain on me, pulling, pulling, and all her strain against mine. How silent she could be, like silence was key turned and door closed fast like hands folded in a lap.

Said never a word, just went on watching me, never saw her once, not once, my eyes were too full of sea. My eyes were drunk with a sea. Saw a line of ships go by, thought which one shall be mine, which ship shall I sail? Sea knew before I did. One more pull and I'm away, one more pull and I was gone, and still she said nothing.

Knew a sea like I did, and like my father did, said so-long and went.

O the cries in my ears then.

"Can you lash and make fast?"

"I can lash and make fast."

"Can you cry heave and heavo?"

"I can cry heave and heavo."

"Can you splice and rig up?"

"I can splice and rig up."

"A pull on a rope and a hold on a mast?"

"Pull on any rope, I'll hold on any mast."

"There she is then, rides high by that quay."

I went along then, and then I saw her, how high and proud she rode at a quay.

O the cries in my ears.

"Stand fast there!"

I stood fast as this one cried to me.

"Can you reave and bend, take a weight and hold her?"

"I can reave and bend, I can take a weight and hold her."

"Stand four-square and take knocks?"

"I can stand four-square and take knocks."

"Hold hard! Can you stand straight in a crooked world?"

"Not tall, yet not small, that's how I am, and broad in the shoulder, hold anything up."

"Set to then. This man's ship knows the way she goes."

I went up then. Got the height of her, got the weight of her, got the feel of her. I knew she knew the way she was going, her nose towards a sea.

Along an iron deck, smelt rope and yarn there. see her tall masts. O the sounds in my ears as I come bv her foc'sle.

Then I went in, there were many men there.

The cries in my ears now.

"Take knocks and say nothing," one said.

"I'll take knocks and say nothing."

"Know a raw deal if you saw one?"

"I'll learn by and by."

"Love a ship and hate her?"

"I'll learn by and by."

"Grow strong on hopes, shake hands with the devil?"

"I'll learn by and by," I said, looked at one, I looked at them all.

Tall and fine they were, one short like me, how he could spit.

"Know the way you go then, learn to step fast. How then d'you feel?"

"Feel it coming up, right inside me now," I said, "know I'll love a ship when I get to know her," said this, then heard them all laugh.

"Then measure it well, for this tide we go. Once gone you're all gone, all gone to a sea. No road this way and no road that, once done, you're done, once in you're fast, once down, you're down. Measure these things well."

"I'll measure them well," I said, how they watched me then, had a feeling coming up, I'm nearer to them, I'll be as them soon.

Their smoking choked me, they laughed at that.

Tall not at all, but I wasn't too small, a good shoulder to me, knew I'd hold myself up.

One caught my hair, one held my arm, one lifted me up. My heart cried, "hold hard," my heart cried, "be still," and I said nothing, and I was quite still. Lifted me clear of her deck they did, then set me down.

"Could be knocked down by spindrift," one said.

"Could be blown off a rigging."

"Get under a winch then, then get down to a scupper."

There came cries to our ears. "All hands to her deck."

Oh, how she blew then, the power in her blow. They pushed me out and I sprawled to her deck.

One caught my arm, his face was like fire.

"Get aft there," he shouted, "Watch how they work. Unship and make fast, heave haul and ply, she's sailing now," the fire in his face grown ruddier still.

I made my way aft, I did as I was bid. I had my father's smell, had the breath of the sea.

"How old?" said one, and I told him then. "Hard work," he said, "and harder than that again," he said. "That's how it is. Not too cruel, not too kind, and it never thinks. Wet if you fall in, deep if you drown."

Laughing away he said this, then cried, "haul away on that rope."

And then I was hauling, hauling with men. Watched her veer away, her nose to a sea. Thought of another sea I'd seen, out of my window. Remembered about whales, could see my mother's look, as I was hauling, could feel the strain in her, as I hauled on that rope. "Good-bye," my mind cried, "good-bye to you. Once done you're done, once away you're away fast, and no turn back."

I thought of all this as I watched her go. We sailed at ten. "Make way there!" she cried, strong out of her horn, "make way, make way." While I heard this I got the touch of her, I felt a heave of that sea.

"Hold hard," one cried, they held, I got my breath back, as I, too, held.

"Here it is, the sea, you wanted it, you got it, you're away, you're fast, done and done again," I thought.

Then we were hauling again, as she slipped out, by quay and basin, by dock and lock, out towards a river, then on to a sea, beyond another one, then oceans, and again oceans, how fine she was that day I went away to a sea I dreamed of, my father's breath in it, my father's bones.

"All hands stand by for'ard," her bosun cried.

That night I was on the sea, and in the sea, and of the sea.
Hard fast, hard fast.

Take one iron bunk, take one mattress of straw, donkey's breakfast, old-timers would say. Take one tip cup and one tin plate, knife, fork and spoon. Take these and keep your mouth shut if you would be wise. Watch bugs come up, watch rats move, take your share of them, keep your mouth shut. Sleep well while you can, ship's clocks race fast. Stand to at the cry, "Out!" stand to no matter where, wherever that cry comes from, even from hell. And at the word "Go!" you go.

Take a look at what you wanted, all this sea, how far she stretches, far as eye can reach, beyond that again, mind's eye sees further. There it is, you wanted it, have it, all of it, every little bit, by drop and drop measure it, by wave and wave, by a heaving and flatness, by a rainbow's colours in it. Look at it, you're on it, you're in it. Break anything, break steel, anything harder than steel, break bone or heart, you can't break that, the hold there, you can't break that.

Away, away, away her horn was crying, soon we were sailing fast, by pilot boat, by tug, by lightship and lighthouse, passed these at speed, her great horn blowing, make way, make way. A fresh cry in my ears.

"Hands for'ard, hands for'ard."

Off I went for'ard with them, I walked just behind them. Thought of my father, I got that smell again, he would bring it home when I was nine.

I turned into my bunk. They let me sleep. I slept, I dreamed about whales. First ache in the bone came, then lightness of air, my head was all buzz. Wakened at twelve, show a leg there, show a leg. I climbed down from my bunk.

Eyes opened wide on a battered face. This man was speaking. "Get the measure of things," this one said. "You best get the measure of things," taking my arm, he dragged me after him to a darkened deck.

"Wind's up," he said, "get the measure of her."

I got her measure well and truly, I heard him laughing then as I lay heaped in her port scupper, that wind blew hard.

And then I knew. You got the measure of wind, measure of fog, you got the measure of a rolling sea. Only once my heart cried for a single sight of that window, often I'd looked out of it, at that flat, cunning sea.

"Hands aft."

I heard that cry, the bosun's mate was behind me.

"Hands aft there," he bawled, "hands aft there," just like it was thunder.

I followed after them, and then I got the measure of my mates. At first I walked on air, at first I stumbled forward, then I got the measure of this deck, rolling sea under her.

Grew tall and more broad, my mind emptied fast. Mother out of it, father out of it, all the thoughts round them, emptying fast.

"You're alone on this sea," a voice said, and I said under my breath, "You're alone on this sea."

I went away a moment, when those others weren't looking, I went right past her poop, I stood where her log was, saw that serpent's line spin out and wondered where, wondered how deep, she was. Saw that water thresh, I heard the sounds of her screws. Then I looked out, far out, beyond where that white log-line could end, and then I felt something, didn't know why it came, didn't know what it was, just went on looking, and sudden I knew. Oh the vastness I saw.

"The great, tumbling, roaring vastness of this," I cried in my mind.

My ear sang from a blow. That moment I was held fast. "Goddam! Goddam you!" and I was dragged away to where those others were working. I started working with them, and then I forgot what I had been thinking.

"Get her fine and shipshape," I heard.

"Get her gear fast away."

"Tarpaulins down, lashed fast to combings, those wedges

snug home."

"Those derricks shipped and tidy."

I was with them, I was one of them, I felt pride then.

One morning and galesome that ship was mine. Yes, sirs, one morning and windy she was mine. I stood alone on her deck, my heart was full. Men passed me by, one winked at me, but no man spoke. They went by. That ship was mine. Then when they were gone for'ard I looked high and low, about and around, and not a soul in sight, only that eye high up, peering over her strong dodger.

"One fine day I'll make a dodger," I thought.

How clear and shipshape, how high and splendid she rode, how I looked at her, all the whole length of this wondrous ship.

"Which way do you go?"

I cried this out against wind, as though she had mouth and lips, as though she could speak to me.

"Which way do you go?"

My! how she rode as I stood and watched her, the feel of her strong then.

By the East and the North, by the South and the West, chase sun and moon, hold stars in a grasp. Through this sea and through that, this ocean and that one, and all the time watching, watching you. Freeze your hair to-day, sweat out your soul to-morrow, get the measure of all seas, the sure line on oceans, yet hold you hard down.

Throw you up and down, toss you round and about, make you like blue to-day, gold the next day, then sudden one craven day make you hate grey. Get the feel of your bone, touch your nerve-centre, make you writhe, make you mad, touch softness and all trust in you, make you all out and gallant, gird you with a faith, make you cry out against me, make you wince at a rawness, make you easy in your mind.

By the East and West, by the North and South I go, always going, always getting somewhere, ploughing through the middle of nowhere. Eye for eye, bone for bone, heart for heart. All the things are known, all the things are measured.

I stood quite still there, I listened, and then I knew that all the things were known and all the things were measured.

CHAPTER III

SING a song, sailor, cried sea, oh sing a song, sailor.

"What song?" he said, "I'm through with a sea."

They opened their mouths all three, only air came out, they could not move, they could not cover his face because they could not move.

"O God," he said, "all over and done with."

Sing a song, sailor, sing a song, cried sea.

What morning and galesome did I know her?

What morning hate her?

"I'm pitching," she says.

"I'm taking seas over."

"I'm taking a list, I'll hold it."

"I'll have you out, all out."

"What is my tune? Nor'east by East's my tune."

"Getting a touch on me now," she says, "feel it coming over, you'll get your share, every bit, every little bit of it. Here I go. Up, up, now listen to thunder in my vitals, listen hard. There she goes. Out, out, all out, you and every man of you, watch me make sea a hill, watch me make it chasm. Out, all out."

Lying on my back again, and that for the third time, a man walking over me.

"Clumsy," he says, "make way there! Get up there! This damn ship's coal has shifted hard over."

More men came by. Got up and went with them, smelt ice as we crossed her well-deck, came to her alleyway, cruelly warm. Went down on her vitals, but thunder had ceased.

O the roars in my ears then.

"Get it over, get it over, damn her and blast her. Get it over."

We got it over, slow at first, then quickening to it, then slow again, first time I'd sweated, saw a hill of coal, mountain of it, she'd flung it high, she'd flung it with a devil's fling. The cries, the cries, far down in her vitals. Shovel and shovel again, and again and again, get that stuff over. Worked slow and worked fast, all the time beating her, every minute beating her, watched her come back, oh so slowly back. Shovelled and shovelled at this mountain of coal, watched her come down, down and down.

"Fine men, that's fine," I heard our bosun crying out.

We'd her even keel then, we had her, we held her. We beat her to it, who thought to put a little gall into our day. At last we came up. Black! Lord, I was black that day, came up warm to her freezing deck.

Freeze as you stepped into upper air, freeze as you walked. Nor'east by East a tune in your ears, a touch on you, feel it every bit, get the shudder from bottom up, get the hard snap in your mouth, bitter bite on hands. Breathe and its ice, laugh and you'll choke, step fast and hear your heart thump. Then away we went for'ard. I come by her fore hatch and then I stopped, looked beyond her bulwarks, beyond foc'sle head, far beyond eyes of her. Feel it come up, smell it coming along, not cold as dead are, that's clean as a bone, this coldness sucks. I walked over to her rail and I looked down to the sea.

Think of sea as a glass, yet smoother than that, that's how she looked, and like a skin to her surface that clammy cloud. Not fog and not mist, cold's skin on what's colder, deep down and cold, and colder than that. I turned my head and looked back at her.

Dead grey this ship looked, and still with a stillness that you could feel.

Watch drop by drop that cold water fall, soon must be ice. A glisten on her as she rode, like a flush on a face, and still, oh how still, how silent she looked. She had the feel of it coming, had the touch on what's cold.

Abaft her bridge I looked, the light soft yet grey, then way

aft and abeam, to starboard and port I looked, looked, and looked again, at last I saw it.

Saw what was coming, how slowly it crept. Not shining as sun shines, this shine was blue, hard shining blue, the glitter there and the bite there, I saw it was ice. Again my head was turned, and again I looked at this ship.

"How then d'you go?" I said, "how then d'you go?"

"Slowly along, but sure, I'll take you past that blue light shining, and can you smell? Look beyond where I am, there no man ever was."

And then I looked where she bid, and then I cried out in my mind.

"God! How cold it is! How alone and cold, frozen, hard shining, the flush to that ice, just like it was face, all murdering fate crouched there as we sailed along.

"Stop looking! Stop dreaming there!"

I swung round of a sudden and then I saw him.

Tall, and how lean, a sailor foot and toe, all height of him sailor, stood laughing at me.

"Get the feel of it," he said, and I got the feel of it.

Deep down in my brain I planted it, shut a door on it, locked, barred and bolted, that icy time.

"There are two hells," he said, "one hot and one cold. We go where it's cold."

That night I froze, sear of iron in it, and he who first gave me the measure of hell coming, rubbed me down with fish oil, I felt warmer then. I slept well and deep, at one of the bell was tumbled out.

"Show a leg there!" one cried, "show a leg there."

I fell from my bunk, was then pushed out to her deck, how I hated her then.

"Getting your measure," she cried.

I did not answer, even heart was too cold.

CHAPTER IV

SING a song, sailor, cried sea, sing a song.

"Flat on my back, arms folded and bound, by bar and rope lashed?"

Sing a song, cried sea.

"Ah, Christ!" he said. "Sing what?" he said.

A song, sailor, a song.

"O sailor," he sang, out of his bloody mouth sang, oh you there and you, oh you and you there, you sing that song. I'm bound and made fast, one journey over, I'm done with, soon done with, now cover me up, now hurl me away, far away to a sea.

Sea heaved and fell, raft tossed and rocked, but they were still. Sing sailor, sing, cried the sea.

I looked in a glass. How tall I'd grown, how fine and broad, and older by far. Touched the North and South, touched the East and West, fell out of one ship, fell into another. Sailed in and sailed out, and came back again. At last I went home. Away in a train, how thoughts were unrolling as we swung by. And then I saw where I was born. I saw the shoulder of that hill, not green as green as it used to be, nor blue as blue at its tip, not like it was when I looked out of that window, how dreams piled there, how whales tossed hard by. And footing that hill was that very same sea, still flat and still silent, and cunning to-day. But she would change.

I saw her then, come out through a door, she saw me come, and then I knew.

As I rose she fell, as I gained she lost, I saw it all now, as clear as the day. I broadened she thinned, I towered, she dwarfed, how small her hands grown, how bent her back. So then I knew, oh clearer than day. My inches her inches, my

broadness her strength, my gain her loss, all giving, all giving.
I spoke to her then.

"Now what can you do," she said, "but what a sea can do." I looked away from her, words wouldn't come, I looked away and there was that window, every inch the same. I went over and looked through it, oh that self-same sea, a whale's sea, and a boy's sea.

"When do you go," she said, and I said nothing.

I went outside. I sat down on the stone step, nothing in my mind, nothing to think of, only something to see with my eyes, long washed by seas. Look at a hill, green it is, and blue at its tip, often walked it, up and down, and up and down again, no hill could be greener in all the wide lands of the world. And then I knew. Wasn't as green as I fancied, nor her tip as blue. Too long on a sea, I thought, oh far too long on a sea. Feelings up and down, torn this way and that, oh which shall it be. No words would come. I got up then and I went back inside.

There she stood, hard by that fireplace, as she always stood, when he came, when my father came, and he was gone, well gone, and I knew I was going. Going far and out of it, this fine day.

"When then d'you go?" she said again.

I stood quite still, a touch of coldness, how quickly it came. I could not speak. I went out of the kitchen, went upstairs, sat down on my bed. "When then d'you go?"

Not a word could I speak, but echoed her own, "When then d'you go?"

When do I go, who's only just home, just home from a sea. When do I go? By these words I was bound. Next morning I went, her cries in my ears.

"You belong to a sea, your father belonged. What sea he rides now God's mind must know, but I know nothing, I can't think at all. But he rides to a sea, oh he rides to a sea. Bone of his bone and strength of his strength, you two are as one, you two are the same. You belong to a sea. What's past is past, what's done is done, you belong to a sea."

There was a moment, and my heart stood still as I looked back at her and away I went then, oh her cries in my ears.

That road was lone I went by, that street was lone, lone where I walked. Walked on and on, my feet had order and direction, I walked towards where ships lay, now saw their masts, how high they struck, seemed piercing sky.

"Then belong to a sea," I cried in my mind, "then belong to a sea." And I stared hard at these ships, and I stared and stared.

And there she was, my fine *Starbound*, all snug and silent against that quay. Like she'd been waiting, long waiting for me. How high she rode, but soon to sink down, a burdensome grind her next voyage was. Sailed away and home again, what's home to a sailor. And taller and broader I'd grown. We got the landfall, we said farewell to ice, not tall and graceful, not riding fine, we got her home. Not high and shining, not lovely and free, all her space weighted, what weighted held fast. Crawled home, crawled home. Got the land, and I cried at first sight of it, they were all laughing again, these men I sailed with, and worked with, who cried out I was no sailor, I'd swallow an anchor, all the same to me, this ship was home. One came up to me and spoke in my ear.

"You look cold and lone," he said, and I said nothing.

We tied her up, we stepped ashore, we were fancy free.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

Had my father's stride, had the measure of sea, tossed in a boat, took what was coming to me, now I was home again, what's home to a sailor.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

Saw ship on ship, tied up to quays, berthed low at basins, come slow through a lock. Home again and taller, and broader by far.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

O that cry in my ears.

Saw tall buildings and small ones, got the smell of things just like I'd known, before I went away to get a measure on a sea. Taller and proud I came down her gangway.

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"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

One by one passed me, then all this crew were gone, I still stood there looking, I was breathing it in, I was thinking of my father, I was thinking of a window, how I'd looked through it to that flat, cunning sea, then gentle and rocking, then all out and tossing, I remembered how once she was so lovely I wanted to fling myself into her.

Thought of it all standing there, lost in a great shed, long bleak and high. I was still standing there, many men passing me by.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

And at last I was listening. At last I was behind her, behind my fine ship, that one named *Starbound*.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

I heard it then, and I could not help looking, I saw her, this smiling woman. How she could smile.

"I'll unfreeze you, sailor," she said.

Like she knew I was cold.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said again. I saw her teeth shining and bright.

"My mother is at home."

"I'll unfreeze you," she said. "One look says you're cold."

"I travel from this hole to a green place at nine," I said.

And then I knew I wasn't and never would, knew it was over, all over, I belonged to a sea, bone of my father's bone, I belonged to a sea. This lie in my mind, false warmth in my heart, out all out, you belong to a sea.

"Unfreeze you by nine, melt cold in your veins," she said.

God! How she could smile.

And there I was stood, held to a pavement. Not upright and free, not free and forthcoming, not caring at all.

Her eyes then met mine. How she watched me watch.

"I'll unfreeze you, sailor."

Her eyes said this, the warmth there said this, her lovely shape said it.

"Count one and two, count a thousand and one, men froze

to the bone, unfrozen by me. Think sailor, three things. Feel of unfreezing, warmth of it, victory of it. I know your bone, knew it before you did, knew your father's bone, knew this and that bone, knew every one, unfroze them all. Look close now, sailor, see what it is, that which unfreezes, come closer," she said.

"Half round a world I've been, saw it by glimpse and glance, held hard to a ship. Travel North at nine, there's a duty far North."

Burn that lie out, I thought, I belong to a sea, there's nothing far North, and never again, now burn that lie out. One look at me and she knew I was lone.

"First you unfreeze," she said, then, "let me tell you a tale." The softness in it, that voice in my ears. Didn't notice at first, how slow it came, I was leaning to her, she was leaning to me.

"There's a coldness unknown to you, that will come soon," she said. Sudden I was walking, walking away off with her, up that great shed.

"Listen," she said, and I listened.

"Listen again," and I listened again, her arm fast in mine.

We passed out of that shed, a jungle strangeness about me, held and went on, paused and looked round, not sure of my ground. All laugh, and carefree she cried in my ears.

"This way," she said, "oh this way, sailor," she cried.

We come by a street, we went down a road, half darkness here.

Came all of a sudden to me, quicker than lightning, quicker than light moves.

"Unfreeze me," I cried, "oh God, I'm cold."

That kind of coldness she knew so well, right down to a bone.

"This way, this way," arm tightening still, I gripped fast to hers, and then I knew, then I could feel, ice melting in me, a fog coming up, couldn't see the time it was, couldn't think of a train, nor remember a place under a hill where I was born. Thought nothing, but felt, a warmth came up, I held on

hard. Heart spoke to her eyes, spoke back to her lips.

"Unfreeze me," I said.

"By this street and that street," she said, "and these streets are sailor's streets," and as she said this we came by a lamp, came up to a door.

We stood quite still, then she caught my hands, clutched hard, looked into my eyes, long and hard looked, she whispered then.

"From where have you come?"

"From around half a world," I said, "from where ice is, always was, will be."

"That's not the coldness I feel in you," she said. "What I feel's older, and older by far, put my finger on it, feel it, hold it, I can melt that away."

"This shiver in me?"

"That coldness in you. Coldness of a time, longer than you can think, longer than you can remember, comes from the sea, never notice it coming, like fingers and soft, creep stealthily up, I've melted this coldness in more than you. Come sailor, this way," she said, how she pouted her lips.

When she opened that door, then I followed her in, she locked it behind her. Never thought of my home, what's home to a sailor, who belongs to a sea, never thought of that train, never thought of the time.

All feeling was in, wave on wave, I followed her up the stairs, watched her step light, light and easy her step was.

"This way," she said.

That night I was warm. That night was all stars, all sun and moon, all colours and gay, all softness and scent, that night I was warm.

That night I slept, slept deeper than sleep, sea poured out of me. Dreamed and made plans, broke them asunder, I laughed and I cried as warmth came in. Why think of a sea so cunning and flat, seen through a window away by the North, why think of a whale, so lone and cold. I sang and I swore. Softly she spoke on my closed mouth.

"Sleep well," she said, how well I slept.
O the sigh in my ear as she woke me up, full light it was.
She said no word, just looked at me, and then I knew.

"Come again," she said.

Yet I held her fast. "Come again," she said.

Four hours had changed her, I knew it was done with, knew it was over. She went to the window and stood looking out. God, how I dreamed then, watching her stand there. "Marry me," I cried, "you're lovely and fine." She looked round at me then.

"You belong to a sea."

"I'd slave my life long for you," I was shouting, rushing up to her, holding her by her arms.

"You belong to a sea."

Oh God, I was mad. "Never again," I cried. "Oh never again I'll come here."

"Others will come, you belong to a sea, come again like they did, come again like they do. I can melt any coldness that comes out of a sea."

I went out then. I went down a street, along a road, every step I took she took, I looked this way, looked that, there she was, feel her in my hands, going where I was going, step to my step. The cries that fell on me as I turned that corner.

I saw them then, all my fine shipmates. I joined on with them, went straight along till we came to "The Goat." We all went inside. How they talked when they sat.

I sat there staring, all the shining bottles, all the brass stuff, all the clink of glass, all that barman's smile, how rosy his face was. One cried out to be served, and doubly quick. The others were now talking, all talking at me.

"Saw her standing there, saw her go up to you, saw you go off. I thought you'd a train for nine of the clock."

How they were laughing as he said this, and whilst he was talking her warmth came back, I could feel it again, and I hated all coldness.

"Everything go well? How'd you feel after that?"

"Fine," I cried, "oh fine, fine," and I looked up at them all. Couldn't hold it back, I meant what I said, "beautiful," I said, "oh she was beautiful."

"Like a Spaniard," said one, "so round and fulsome, so dark with that warmth which darkness gives?"

"Like a Chinese and slender, one touch she'd break, was she like that?"

"Fine," I cried, "fine," her warmth sucked at me, "beautiful," I said.

"Like an Italian and small, or a Russian and fat?"

And I said no word, for I could say nothing, how their cries rose, one on another, of woman and woman, and woman again, and drink after drink, and cry after cry, how busy he was that rosy-faced barman.

I thought of but one, this one I'd known, see her smile now, watch her lips move, how she melted off coldness, all heaven to me. We drank and we drank again, how everything shone for me.

One nudged my arm, I looked round at him. He was short and fat, a whale of a smile.

"Listen here," he said, and I was listening. "What's beautiful to you, is two a penny to us."

"I asked her to marry me," I said, speaking low. I was ashamed that all might hear.

"O Lord," this one said, "what a fool you are. Now here's my advice. She's right about coldness, she's right about that. Take one here, take one there, no matter where and when, just take one easy, here and there. They undo what the sea does, they're sailormen's girls. Understand our feelings, how well they know them, got the touch for coldness, melt it away. By and by you'll know, get height and depth of it, by and by you'll know."

"I know now," I shouted, and they all looked at me.

"Hush it," he said, "you'll be laughed out of this place," his hand hard on my mouth. "You don't know and won't know till your times comes. What goes with coldness is something

that's lone, understand me well, loneliness you feel wherever is coldness. They melt it away. Now boy," he cried, "have a drink on me."

I drank and I drank, oh the whole world was shining.

CHAPTER V

THAT one who curbs frenzies in a sea.

That great hauler on the ropes.

That one who plies a fire, and that one who watches a star.

That one who tells a tide.

That one stood sentinel in the wilderness.

Have mercy on them, O Lord.

That one with a heart's load of hope.

That one whose scalp freezes in the North,

And in the humid South and in the pestilential East.

All sailors these, then have mercy on them, O Lord.

That one who breathes in a fog, and that one surrounded by rage.

That one hidden behind a screen of fear, and that one struck dumb by a thought.

Watch over them, O Lord, all are sailormen, and all are proper to a sea.

From ocean to ocean stretching, and from ship to ship, and from sea to sea.

And from dock to dock.

From all perils and from all dangers guard them, O Lord.

And deliver them

From fogs and winds and tempest rages.

Hold them, O Lord, full fair and free.

These words floated up, up, as I lay in my room I had lodged for the night. I had taken my fill, slept well and fast. Now my eyes opened wide. I saw that other bed and a man lying there. I gave him one look and he was up.

"What kind of a day is it?" I said.

My companion had snored, yet was early afoot, he heard those cries, too, from far below. He dressed quick and determined.

"Maybe," I thought, "he knows where he goes."

"What time is it?" I said.

"A grey time," he said.

"And what kind of day, shipmate?"

"Grey."

I was dead silent then, hearing singing afar.

This shipmate heard it, too, he went over, looked out of a window.

"Depart thence, and God be with you," I heard.

"How long and grey," I heard.

"The Lord watch over all sailormen this morn."

"Blessing a ship," he said, at that shut down the window.

I jumped from my bed, I ran to that window, I looked far down below. I saw a ship go, drawn away by tugs, left one behind. And I looked at her.

My! She was tall, and massive and comely, yet exceeding grey. Gone her fine line, all her colour gone, that fine look gone, all gone.

"What ship is this?"

I stared down at this ship. How strong and how stark.

"Her name is Grey," he said, "in a grey time."

"And men are grey," I cried.

"Maybe," he said, "that's more than I know."

"Do you sail in her?" I said.

"I sail in her at noon."

"And where does she go?"

"By quay and by lock, by basin and jetty, down the tail of a bank, then easy and free, she makes for a river, there's sea beyond, she'll quicken on sight of it."

And then my heart was fair pounding.

"And then where?" I cried.

"From river to sea, then further than that, and all the time grey, then further again. Do you know where she sails?"

"No! Where then does she sail?"

"Through the seven corridors of hell, all opened up, in a grey time. Men may be grey, but I do not know. We sail at noon. By look and by cut of you, by shape and size you're a sailor man, yes, and I'll tell of something for you."

"I'll sail her," I cried. "I'll sail her at noon."

"Not so fast," he said then. "She'll sail at noon, don't be bothered by that, and you'll sail with her, but not how you think."

I sat down on my bed, and he on his, we sized each other up. "This one is stranger," I thought, this one was not known. How fleeting the faces, and quick the hands, the looseness in both, no more than a glance, no more than a touch. Learn to know men, ah, you can't know these, sailing all oceans each stroke of the clock.

By this road and that road, to this ship and that one, around a half world, around a whole world, how can you know them.

"I held fast to *Starbound* till yesterday week," I said.

"This one's no name, save a number," he said, paused for a while, "you're a stranger to me."

"And you are to me," I thought, thinking of my fine mates, sailed away and fast whilst I was home, what's home to a sailor?

Then he was plying me, those questions came fast. New cries in my ear.

"Can you take a place with others? Where they are, no sea is?"

I thought awhile, looking away from him, but he would not wait.

"Can you strip clean to waist, can you go down a steel ladder, and lower than you've been, and much lower than that? Can you lay and fire, stoke all hours of the clock round? Watch a gauge and boiler, know a shafting if you saw one, can you buckle to and keep at it, shovel and shovel again, can you haul up ash, know if steam got too wild, too great a hold on a boiler, can you work hard right down to your guts?"

I listened to this and I thought well on it.

"Well?" he said, "well?"

"I can do all that," I said.

"Once down, you're down, once you got the touch on you it stays, mark those fine eyes, narrow you down a bit, and you'll see no sea, never a bit, not a tiny bit. How then do you feel towards this grey ship?"

How well he knew, no need to ask, no need to wait for an answer, he had it all. Got the measure of a sailorman who belonged to a sea.

"All right, let's go," he said. "I'll see you well fixed up. She's a racer this ship is, keep your back bent. Hold hard a minute, hold hard."

Wasn't thinking about him, wasn't thinking about this grey one, just of my fine mates, that ship called *Starbound*.

Wanted to think of them then, think hard on them, in this moment of mine, before I was bound to this thing name of Grey. But how could I think?

For he was behind, and he was in front, and he was aside, now right and now left. Well guarded was I. One look at his back and I knew who he was, one look at his face and I was sure, oh yes, I knew. I'd heard a tale, yes, many a tale from men on the *Starbound*.

This one was an agent, sea's agent to me, sea's agent to all who sail fast in ships. How they sniff and they snuff, how they smell a ship out, and smell a man short, aye, and smell a man bound. For out of a ship, or alone on a quay, or lost in a town, then a sailor is bound and away from a sea.

"How many aboard?" I said.

"How many are short in her?" I said.

He stopped dead in his tracks, took a long look at me.

"You know who I am?"

"I know who you are, you're the tout from the sea."

"Take what's coming to you," he said, "we're near her now."

"I can take what's coming, show on to this ship, yes, show

on tout whilst I've the mind for it."

The glint in his eye.

"Three hundred aboard and thirty-one short," he said.

"A reason for this," he added, spitting out of him then.

"What reason?" I said.

"Find out when you sign, find out when you're lost."

On, he went on, I following fast. So we came to this ship, so I went up aboard her.

Fresh cries to my ears then, how bewildered I was, how greater she was than that ship *Starbound*.

"Hold hard there," and I held hard.

"Stand by," and I stood by.

"Get amidships for signing," and I walked quickly that way.

Met up with a man then, I was soon talking to him.

"Hello there," he said.

"Hello there," I said.

"Signing in this one?"

"Maybe I am, and maybe I'm not," I said.

"Oh yes, you'll sign in her all right, tell that by the look of you. I'm signing, too. Dove's my name, but not my nature. I'm a devil to work for. How long have you sailed?"

He had a little mouth and a little smile, a little man and a little hand. He was standing there, arms folded, fine and brave he looked leaning against this ship's bulkhead. He kept looking at me.

"I say how long have you sailed?" he said.

"I said that already," I said. "Months on a time, I told you, and weeks without counting, I was born to a sea."

"Come closer," he said. "Lean against this bulkhead, listen hard to what I say."

"Say on," I cried, not caring much, "be it good or bad I sign in her this day."

He was so small, and I was so tall, I leaned down to him, saw the scruff of a face.

"Say away," I said, "say away, I'll be listening." And at that he put an open hand to his mouth, I thought he'd halloo

to me, but it was only a scruff's whisper that kept coming up out of his mouth.

"She'll not sail at noon," he said, "before or after, she'll sail when its dark, not a minute in front, and not one behind, but just as its dark. Never mind your agent, I tell you she'll sail in the dark. I'll go with her, and so will you. Been in this ship ever since they builded her.

Man! That first trip in her, all spick and span and shining then, that trip was like bells ringing round the world, and shouts everywhere, and music everywhere, know every wink of this ship. Hear the grind in her vitals, hear the wind in her truck-top belly away behind many a strong dodger, suck away at a foc'sle door, make mad circles in a chain-locker, hear her heave and ho. Yes, sir, I know this one.

"Now I sailed many a trip, to many an ocean bound. What did I learn? I learned that the more you love a sea, the more you hate her. Sailed trip on trip, and then again, never stopped, nobody ever stopped, and she never did. Away and away and away she'd go. Callao and New Orleans, Oran and the Maine, Karachi and Chittigong, Nagasaki and Portland, China and Peru. Oh, all those places, time on time, over and over and over again. Knew them places, knew them a lot, then knew them too much, got sick of the sight of them.

"I'd a wife and a kid and a mother gone eighty. We lived hard by a dock. One trip we came home, we tied her up, we came down ashore. All men bound fast. She lay there to rust, she lay there to rot.

"Now there's a mind a sailorman can never get inside of, mind of a feller with all authority on ship and sea, who can think a ship hard in and hold her fast to a quay, and at the same time think men out and bound by hard stones. That's a taste in a sailor's mouth. You follow me?"

I noticed his squint then, I said. "I'm following you."

"Ha!" he said, "there it is then! You see if a sailorman could watch that mind doing its thinking, then he'd have fair warning of that ship's surrender, and a fair warning to his right

hand, and then a fair warning to a hungry time. But I was just bound, and so were they.

"Know the way a sailor walks, looks in his eye, when his right hand's powerless, that's a taste in a sailor's mouth.

"All right, I said to myself, all right, get it in your mouth, feel it there hard, and I did. Multiply me by the first number you can think of."

"What then?" I said.

I was warming to him a little, but not too much.

"When a ship's bottom can't carry what makes some men easy in their minds, then she rusts. Many a one rusted. This one did."

How fiercely he pointed his finger at this grey ship.

"This one I'm standing on. But a day came, and it was our day. Such a row there was, such orders flying about everywhere. Every ship wanted, every ship sail, every man aboard, and as fast as his feet could take him. Yes, sir."

He reached up, I reached down.

"You'll sign in her all right," he said, and I did. Yes, he was right. Heard my name called and I went along to where they were signing. Came up to a table, took a pen to my hand, held easy with this. More cries in my ears. I listened and listened.

"Name?"

"Manion, John."

"Fired before?"

"No."

"Sign this man."

I signed.

That night we sailed out and there were no directions. Not for this or that man, but only her captain, and he'd wait two days, watch dots on a chart. When I got to her foc'sle I chose a bunk, and sure enough he was under me and not over me, this man name of Dove, but from that time onwards his name was Scruff.

"Show a leg, Scruff," I'd say, and, "Turn out, Scruff," I'd say.

He didn't mind that at all, he came to it easy, all manner of orders came easy with him. And that first shift I was working below with him. My first watch below.

"You're trimming to me," he said.

"Trimming to no man. I signed to fire her."

"Trimming to me," he said.

"Damned if I am."

"All the same, you're trimming to me."

His little mouth shut fast like a trap, and he said no more.

Wasn't any use talking, saying anything, there it was, down sure on paper—trimming to Scruff. Couldn't wring the neck of that raw deal, couldn't do anything. Keep your mouth shut, say nothing. That's how it was. I remembered what they had told me aboard the *Starbound*. God! How I sighed for that ship. I called myself crazy now to have left her, signed in this one, whose name was Grey. I'd been used to a mast, and casting her log, taking temperature of air and water, and heaving a lead and splicing a wire, and reaving a fall, and keeping a fine steady eye on that compass point, and shipping her derricks, too.

O why did I sign to fire down below?

Ask nothing, say nothing, my mind told me. Take what's coming, so I took what's coming.

"Know a ship and hold her." I remembered that. So I said to myself, "I'll know her, and I'll hold her," and I did, and I went on holding her. Get the trick of the shovel, got the cue to a barrow each time she heeled over, and over again, how she could roll this thing called Grey. No name for a ship that sails the wide seas.

She'd the number of nine and the letter of X. By that you knew her. We sailed in the dark, and I trimmed her below.

CHAPTER VI

"How she pitches and heaves," he said.

"I can't hear her heave."

"How she rolls like the devil."

"And I can't hear her roll," I said, "I'm so used to a deck."

"She's speeding and fast."

"Let her speed where she's bound," I said.

We were bared to the waist, he was staring at me, how thin like a rake he was, not a shine to his skin.

"Can this one sweat?" I thought.

"You've not trimmed before," he said.

"I was in the *Starbound*. Stood fast to her deck, that's how I was," I said.

"O, more fool you," he cried, "saw how your skin glistened, that power of a shoulder, that clean and straight look, and that fine back, oh, and brightness of eye. Once I'd one like you," he was saying, "but that's long ago."

He was crouching there, like he'd the weight of a world on this thin back. He took up his water-can and began gobbling at it, and then he gave me a drink from it, and I tasted the oatmeal in it, and he said quick, "Keeps the heat down, boy, keeps the heat down in a man."

"Goddam and goddam."

Oh that roar in my ear as Scruff rushed in from her engine-room. I stood to my feet, took a good and sure hold on that barrow of steel, pushed hard, bent down to it. I went away towards a blackness and blacker than that, I was soon lost in this. Blacker than I'd seen on many a night, stood tight in a crow's nest. God! how I thought of my fine *Starbound*. I was lost in this, this ship called Grey, but I never lost his cries, those cries from Scruff. My, he could cry and howl out of him.

Goddam and goddam and blast and blast, that's how he was, a man named Scruff. I shovelled in darkness and shovelled

away. Then a blob of something white came near me, hell, he'd followed the tail of his cries. How I hated that man, how I hated him then.

"Buckle to and fast, get a barrow in and out, keep your back bent, keep to it, in and out and in again, shovel and shovel again, we're hard bound for an ocean that only one knows."

How I hated this Scruff, how I hated this Grey, how I hated a sea. Couldn't hold it back, not a moment more, I shouted in his ear, face close to his face.

"Ah! Damn you and the ship and the oceans, too."

But he only laughed, like a man who knows all, secret of ship and sea, this Scruff of a sailorman.

"Sea broke me first," he said, suddenly quiet he seemed, and I thought, "A fit of temper, perhaps, and no more than that."

"Sea broke me first, your turn will come soon."

He went away then, heard him firing his fire.

I filled the barrow with coal, I ran her in, up-kecked and heaped the stuff there, went out again. Saw Scruff bent to it, saw a fire door open. God, the heat that licked out of her. Come back once again. Oh, how I was raging inside me now.

"Coal, coal," my mind cried, "give him more coal, not enough in a mine for this hungry fire, for this cursing man. I'll pile and I'll pile, I'll smother him in coal. I'll blind him and bind him with all this black coal."

In and out I came, back and forth I went, how her deck rose and fell, I got her heave then. This Grey was monster, unlike the *Starbound*.

"Take it easy," Scruff said.

How changed his voice was. I stood behind him and watched. He knew his job, this scruff of a man, and behind what was scruff, and behind what was swear, a warmth to this man. At last he went out.

"He's all right, but hasty, just hasty, that's all." This rake of a man said. "Now sit you down, now learn to squat, now take her easy."

At that I sat down, took the weight off my haunches. Heard

a bell go, heard a man shout from high up above.

"Eight bells," this thin man said to me, "hear him shouting there?"

"I can hear him all right," I said.

"Time to go up."

"I know that, too," I said.

"And time for me," he said. Lord, he was trying to laugh.

How thin was his smile, as thin as his back, as thin as his hands. Then he had his hand on my arm, the dryness in it, I could feel it there. I wondered then if he ever sweated like others, like men do, wondered what took his blood and left him like this, the rake of a man.

"Dove's all right, just hasty that's all. Take no notice of him. Just like us all, like all sailormen, once chewed on a bone," and then he laughed again.

One went and another went, I watched them go, still squatting there. I watched them all go, heard others on top. I sat there quite still.

Then I was alone. Got the shape of this place, got the length and breadth of it, got the feel of it, this place where her heart pulsed, pulsed steady and sure, all the time pulsing. I heard feet clanging on the high ladders, and I knew it was time I went up. How those ladders rang out under the strike of their feet.

"Up you get," one said.

"Up you go. This man's ship won't thank you for sitting there."

"How'd you make it, sailor?" another said.

"I made it fine," I said.

"Eight bells has struck, get up to her deck, get a wind in your guts."

"Righto," I said, and then I was climbing; how the reek followed me.

Reek of ash and steam, of coal and smoke, reek of hot steel, how it followed me up, like it was determined never to let go,

to hold me back. Then my feet were fair racing, by rung and rung, my heart racing, too.

I wanted that air, all the lot of it, my lungs cried out. So I came to her deck. Lord, the wine in that air, the taste of it, feel of it, just standing there, and still as still, like my job was just standing, just standing still and breathing it in, all this fine air.

Looked beyond her fiddley, then I went slowly along, went down her companion ladder. Looked beyond to a sea, that sea was green, and smoother than glass is, not a wave stir, just gently heaving, heaving and heaving as green as green. I went along and I came to her main deck, still gobbling that air. Then I leaned on her rail, wiped sweat off me with the rag given me by Scruff, and as fast as I wiped it was coming again.

Sailor, this sea is green, to-morrow may be grey, grey as this ship, to-morrow may be black, oh blacker than hell, thick and slow moving, the sluggish in it. Yet you'll sail on, and on you'll sail, on, never knowing this sea. Sailor, breathe hard, take it all in, this God's air you wanted, you'll want it again, every bit of it, and again and again, before you go down, down where you wanted to go. Why hate a broad deck, why jib at a mast, and that climb to her top?

Don't think of that now, but a minute can fool you, and now you've been fooled, so fire away, sailor, and fire again.

How they rose up, how they tumbled up, all these thoughts as I stood staring out at a green sea. Never a thought of my own, that place I was born in, never a thought to that sea I'd first dreamed by.

"Hey there, dreamy, don't you want no grub?"

There he was at my elbow, this one named Scruff. We went for'ard together. I was getting the touch on him, slowly it was coming. I'd know him soon, like I'd known those aboard my *Starbound*. One thought about her and my heart could heave up, heave for that first ship that sent me to sea.

"You'll do all right," Scruff said, "you'll learn, and don't

you go worrying about that. You'll learn what sea is aboard this man's ship."

Whether he was fooling, whether he was wise, I am deaf to his talk.

I thought only of feeding my hungry gut. We went into our foc'sle, all were eating like wolves what there was to eat in this man's ship. They made place for me and for Scruff.

"Oh, he's all right," one said, "a bit used to a mast, shinning up that way, not shinning below, but he'll do."

"Suppose, just suppose that only his braces came up at the end of a watch," another said, straight to my face, but without looking at me. "What then?"

I said not a word, I just went on eating, that air did me good.

"What then?" said this one, "I say what then?"

Everyone laughed. Then I watched this man. His teeth were green, as green as the sea, and bucked in his mouth. You'd see him smile, see those teeth buck, think them uncomfortable in that thin line of a mouth of his.

"And suppose that one fine day we go down and find this sailorman hanging by his skin and bone to a fire-door. What then?" And as he said this he was looking at them all, but never at me.

All this to scare me, but could not scare. I was hungry, and ate.

"And just suppose one night it's windy, a dirty slink to a sea, and the light going fast, and beginning to rain. And this fine sailor here hauls up with the ash, stands by an old shute, hauls up and hauls up, and hell's draught coming down. So hauling one up, and hauling two up, and again and again, then more and more ash, like it dribbled from mountains, mountains of ash and never no end. That could wear to his bone. Mind how the wet ash can get to the eyes, I've known it myself, stood under a shute, met the draught coming down. Just suppose this fine sailor was washed down to a sea. I say just suppose, and what then?"

How they were laughing, how one and all knew I was strange to the job.

"Suppose a boiler burst?"

"Suppose a fire blew sudden?"

I let them talk.

"Talk away," I thought, "I'll not mind a word, have your jinks and your jokes."

When I finished my grub, one made way, and then another, and I left them, and went out for a good swill down. Black as black I was, the strong hard soap was good, the water freshened me up. When I came in from the lavatory, which was where the wash-house was in this fine ship, so a sailorman could, if he wanted to, do two jobs at once, I went straight to my bunk, undressed and turned in. As soon as I touched pillow came the ache to my bone. A long, dry ache, then a sudden quick twinge, then this long ache again. But I slept hard and I lay like a log. Never moved again till I heard those bells ringing, and the four hours I'd had seemed nothing at all. I was soon dressed and going off with my watch, sweat rag to my neck like the rest of them, and nibbling an edge of it as was their habit, and now mine, the sea the same, but a fair wind rising, but soon forgot about that as we passed through the door. We went down the ladders, we could hear the hails of the others below. We said hello, and take care, make way, and sleep well. Then I heard her pulse again, still steady, still going strong. I wondered where we'd find ourselves one of these fine days. Only one man of us knew to which ocean she'd go, watching dots on a chart.

CHAPTER VII

THIS time it was hard going, hard firing, hard trimming. What buckling-to there was, what rush of men, what rout of ash, doors opening and shutting, and that sound in the tube. I could hear a faint echo come in from behind. We knew what

this was, increasing her speed. We shovelled and we shovelled again, we ran in and out, more coal to the fires, more steam to the boilers, what power in her pulse. Not a thought in my head, not feeling a thing, just hungry to look, what power in my eye then, I couldn't stop looking. At this shape and that shape, this twist and turn, this lay and that hold. At last my chance came, just ran in a load.

"Step in there and ask Morgan, the greaser, for the loan of a spanner, and step sharp," Scruff said, and the next minute I was standing in her engine-room. The first time I'd seen one, I'd always looked to a mast. How it glistened and shone, how my eyes watched those pistons go thresh and throb.

"You Morgan, the greaser?" I said to a short, fat man; he was oiling her engines.

"I am! Who are you?"

Didn't matter who I was. I just asked him for the loan of the spanner for a man named Scruff. He looked at me for a moment or two, then walked silently away.

How I stared at those engines, how easily moving, not a creak nor a crack, so oilily smooth, so easily sure. How the pistons went racing, the shine of the brass, the hum of a wheel, the brightness of pipes. What a row of clocks there. I looked at everything. I left nothing unseen in that place, all bewildering and strange to me as a sailor.

"All this makes her go," I thought, then quick came another thought. "Why you're under an ocean, you're under a sea."

"Here y'are," this man Morgan said, he was standing behind me. But I never saw him, wasn't listening, my eyes on all this.

"Here y'are," he shouted, like a bellow to my ears, "stop staring and take that spanner along. Have you worked in a stokehold before?"

"No," I said, "but I've been behind a mast and before a mast."

"Oh," he said, paused a while, "I see," he said.

I got on to something then, somethindg almost pitying in his voice as he said this, like he was sorry for a sailorman first

time in a stokehold. I went back to Scruff and I gave him this spanner.

"All that time to get a goddam spanner," he cried out in a rage.

All that brightness and movement and pattern of things, all that humming and pulsing, that twisting and turning, that tick of clocks, and those racing pistons, was all I could think of as I gave him the tool.

"Get down to it," he cried, "down to it. We want more coal, more power, more steam and speed, we're in the devil's own sea."

"The devil's own sea?"

"The devil's own sea. Get down to it, man."

Soon I was trimming and filling that maw, that wide open maw, as hot and as wild as an African sun. Scruff filled this maw, took no notice of me, just looked to his fire, like a king to him, like an emperor to him, devil's own master to him, this wild, roaring fire. Down went the shovel and in went the coal. God! The lick in those flames that tumbled out then, and on he went, on, I thought he must burst, I thought he must drop. His eyes were half-closed, sweat glistened on him, fell down from his head, fell down from his arms, and on he went, on.

Was I ready to drop, was I ready to cry out then, couldn't if I'd tried, my mouth was so dry. The stink and the stench, and the reek and the rout, the rush and the crush that that power dragged out, dragged full out of steel and full out of men. That thin one came by me.

"Take a drink, sailor, take a good, long, hard pull of it, and you'll feel fine. It's the meal in it, stops the heat in a man. There's a ~~stump~~ to your shoulder, I just noticed it then, ah, you'll come to it soon, you'll be a fireman bound. What firemen hate is the smell of a sea, so used to the reek and the ash and the steam. Take another pull, sailor," he said, "and next time you come down this way take care to bring with you a can full of water, and drop a little meal into it. Helps you

no end. I've been firing this one since she was builded, now what about that? "

"Ah! What about nothing," I cried, suddenly hating the place, why had I come here, why'd I left my fine *Starbound*? Hear the sound of a wave, hear the rush of a wind there, hear nothing here but clink and clank, and clink and clank again. Then I was mad with myself for thinking like this. So I said to this rake of a man, "I'll mind that, I'll bring down that can of water the next watch, be sure of that. And tell me," I said, "where in hell's she bound, this long, grey ship, with number for name. I say, where *is* she bound?"

"I don't know, and he doesn't know, and no man knows hereabouts. Ah, hell, who cares, who cares where she goes?"

The moment I looked at him I saw sleep in his eyes. I was thinking again, "how bent this back, this rake of a man, and no blood to him at all."

"Thank you," I said, "that was good as good, that was fine, feel better for it," and I handed him back his water can.

"You didn't mind all the talk in the foc'sle?" he said.

"I didn't mind any talk in a foc'sle," I said.

Then again her bells went, eight of them ringing. Another watch was ended, up the ladders we streamed, then right for'ard to a foc'sle, to something a sailor likes after fours hours below. Give me five minutes and I'm washed, changed, another two and I'm flat in my bunk. Not a sound in that place, a snore here and there, but nothing you'd call noise, save that chain in her locker, give a heave now, give a heave again as she rode her nose up and then down. I lay quiet in my bunk.

"I'll marry," I said to myself, "yes, I'll marry. Marry and have two kids, a boy and a girl, one curly, one straight."

Now thinking this, reek and stench went, heat and cold went, ache went. Thinking this and iron bunk was no more, table lashed to a deck-head could not be seen by me, even though I'd

my eyes fast on it. That grey one's heart thumps ceased, those men all gone, shape of a foc'sle went, all gone, all gone. I just went on thinking.

"I'll marry, that's what I'll do, never feel a coldness again, never feel a loneliness, get a hold on something fine, something to hang on to, something to tear away from, too, for a sea's a sea, and an ocean's an ocean, and both pull hard."

"I'll marry her twenty; no, she'll be a bit older. I'll think of the look of her, the shape and touch of her. What is her name? May or Julie or Pauline or Rosy or Maggie or what? Thinking of this, and up they came, wave on wave of them, clouding things out, grey of this ship and drab of this foc'sle, and green of the sea.

"No! I'll have *three* kids, all boys, and when they grow up I'll fight them, and fight a sea that would take them." That made me laugh.

"O, damn and blast, I'll have four of them, and all will be girls, one brown-eyed, one blue, perhaps one be grey-eyed, but not like this grey."

There I was, stretched in my bunk and thinking all this. Couldn't sleep this watch, like something crept up, a finger, a touch, I'd shut my eye tight, they'd open again, these fingers were at them, couldn't sleep at all. Just lay and flat, just lay and stretched, a silence around me, save for one man's loud snoring. I knew who this was, the scruff of a man. I'd warmed to him though, he'd a coldness about him, fair hard at his edges, and brittle his nerves, go crack at a touch. But I'd warmed to this man, for as the rake had told me, he was like sailors, one man and all, he'd chewed on a bone, he'd known of a coldness to be melted away, and loneless to follow its wake. Yes, I'd warmed to this scruff. I'd warmed to them all, I'd forgotten *Starbound*, though often enough I'd wonder, "Now what sea can she be in?" Thought, too, of her mast so dizzily climbed, a splendour of boat she was, but first ships are like that. Nothing can alter and nothing can spoil first touch to a ship.

"By God, I'll do it, I'll do it this very next trip, soon as we're home, I'll find a girl and marry her," I said to myself. "O that'll be fine."

Then I told myself this again and again, it rocked me to sleep, and deeper than that, just thinking of this, all colours and gay were flying about each minute I thought about it. When a hand woke me up, a girl named Nellie had just bid me a good-bye.

"Show a leg, sailor, show a leg there!"

I showed a leg. The first thought to my head as I walked down her deck was of blackness of sea, all green had gone. It was getting quite dark, see a star coming out. That tall, thin rake of a man walked with me.

"See you got your little can and your oatmeal," he said.

I nodded my head, we passed down her alleyway, got lost on her ladders.

I worked and I wasn't bothered by it, wasn't even noticing that work, just movements to me, and running and pushing and heaving and running again. I was too full up inside, all that thinking I'd done, flat in my bed. I kept thinking and thinking about that.

Never mind a fire, never mind a ship, never mind a damn sea. So I went on thinking as I shovelled, as I passed to and fro and in and out of her bunkers, what a game it all was, what a juggling of names, of shapes and sizes of girls, and counting of children. I thought, "All right, sir, you'll anchor, you'll get your hook to the mud next time she's in, just wait till her nose touches a quay, your feet itching to fly ashore, to make thoughts real, feel them flesh and blood, make a dream come true."

Now I got the idea into my head that if only you think hard enough about this, it'll all come true, but it didn't. Away this ship was racing, what cared she about my thoughts, she was going somewhere, too, she'd a hold on something dark, a date with a sea. A ship's like a man is, has her moods and fancies, her twists and her turns, a will and a way. I knew where I

was going, that next fine time we docked, but so did she.

Hear her cry out of engines, hear her cry then.

"I'm hard bound for a sea, I've a date with a sea."

Hear her cry this in every move of her, speeding along. O
hear her cry again. "What can you count, and you and you,
all that lot of you, now driving me fast."

That's how a ship can be, that's how she was. And she
kept her date with a sea, grey like the look of her, like the very
feel of her. God! How we raced that ship, heaping her black
with coal that burned to a frenzy, sent pistons racing so murde-
ring fast, sent her all out for a date with a sea. Before eight
bells went, before that watch was finished, she'd had her way,
and because she had her way, the first corridor of hell opened
up, she passed into this, she took us flying with her.

CHAPTER VIII

DEEP below, oh very deep below, was something that had a
date with this sea, and with this ship, and with all sailormen
aboard her. Sort of fish, grey-black under the belly, grey-black
over. Not like any fish you ever saw, this one had a brain
brighter than anything you ever heard of. Call this fish iron,
call it steel, little wheels whirl inside its belly. How hard the
eye, harder than any steel is. Could look one way only, could
open and shut like any eye, but it could not blink, nor tremble,
nor warm to anything, it could not smile. And it looked one
way towards a ship, towards where sailormen are. At home,
in their world, fast there. It had a date with us. This thing
was mouthless, was dumb, it made no noise as it swam, you
couldn't hear, wouldn't know if she were about. But she knew
if you were, her bright eye shine and fasten on smell of a
ship, see it a long way off, feel all sailormen aboard her. This
fish liked a grey ship, she liked a good hold on sailormen. This
fish was new to a sea, this God's fright, but not to men, being a
man's fish, made by men.

Get a line on a wave, hump-backed, oh, any kind of wave, get a line on a sea, its heave and fall, its slow move towards a sun, or away from a sun. Get a line on storms, hurricanes or typhoons, Trade winds, Monsoons, any kind of squall, or any becalming, or lost mountains of ice slow moving, trailing many fates with them as they go, and all are proper to a sea, a sea knows this, all of them, got a measure for them all. And so had we, got a line on every one of them, by chance and fate, by weal or woe, by error and victory, these are proper to sailorsmen, too. But this fish was new, and strange to a sea, stranger to fish. This fish charted a hell's region no man ever heard of.

Never thought of this thing, no man ever does, outside men's minds, and outside mine, mine was full of marrying and shapes of girls, smiling of kids. How she cried for a speed this long thing with number for a name, add X to that. How she cried and went on crying. And we gave it to her, by the barrow load and the shovelful, that maw was tremendous, what mountains of fire, and she could take more. I saw Scruff sweat, saw that rake of a man, and I heard him sigh, even he had been touched by her sudden frenzy, unbeknown to him, like to us all, her sure date with a sea.

How she trembled and shook, convulsed and rolled, and pitched and ploughed and reeled and spun, how dizzied with speed, this race for a date, fixed in a black sea. How she sang and she hummed. The shout in my ear then, Scruff yelling at me, I staring at him.

"More speed, more coal, more power, and more again, get down to it."

"I'm getting down to it," I said.

"Then get down to it again, and then again, and again and again after that." Could be tough at his edges, Scruff could, and the devil's own drive in him, like he climbed into his mouth each time that man spoke.

"Goddam, I am," I said.

"Keep at it."

"I am."

"Don't talk. Get the coal in. Bring it along quick, get back for more, get back again, bring in more and more, keep your eyes off a clock."

How he tore and he sweated, as though he'd known, what I didn't know, what they didn't know, this ride fast for hell.

"Take a drink, man," the rake said.

"Thank you," I said, "thank you again," handing him back his can. "I've mine." Laughing out of them, knew I'd drunk all mine, so greedy I was.

"Oh, take another," he said, "you'll need it."

How warm he was, this bloodless man, this one always bent, hung hard to a fire-door, as though he'd been born there, dropped out of a fire. Some men are fine, and this one was finer, yes, finer than fine, I'll always remember him. Never found out his name, always will be just "the Rake" to me, long as one, thin as one, hard as one.

Lord! How she ate coal for that last hour. Watch a flame lick out of her, you'd think at once, "By hell, a lick further and you'll be licked in," add more to her speed.

That minute I fell. I fell heavy and I couldn't get up, couldn't move. Scruff came up to me.

"You'll get over it," he said, "you'll come through it." He went away, a second or two later he came back with a bucketful of cold water, flung it over me, how it cooled me down. I felt better for that, and the heat of the place soon had me dry again. Back to my shovelling, back to my pitching of the black stuff, and filling up for Scruff.

Heard voices talking about her speed. One came down her ladder straight to the stokehold.

"We're over a fish," he said, "they say she's doing twenty clean knots, a very tall tale, I'd say, twenty knots they say, but another fish ahead of her. Now what about that?"

"What about nothing," Scruff shouted, "get to hell out of here, stopping men from their work. Goddam and blast," he cried at last. Off he went towards her engine-room. I could

just hear the quick scuffle of talk then, but didn't understand anything, a buzz of talk, spoken fast.

O, then there was thunder, then there were cries. I was thrown into a corner and another man came after me, then another again, all heaped together we were. Ah, this thing got her date all right. The clanging of bells shut out all the echoes of that thunder. Yes, sir.

Something rained, like scalding rain, and this was ash. Something made your very skin seem to cry out like it was covered with little tongues, and this was steam. Oh, cloud upon cloud of it. Something reeled, what a monster reeling, and then another, Christ! but they reeled, her boilers were free, those boilers amok, their size and their shape took a battering blow. One ladder came down, not a sound as it fell, broken loose from its bars, its bolts and its nuts, stretched over the place.

So in came the sea, weight of it, cold of it, near to those boilers, near to where we were, eyes blinded, heart's shock in that moment, then I heard a cry.

"Climb! Oh, climb, men climb."

I heard another, this cry was, "Up, up, oh men, get up."

As the lights had gone out we climbed in the darkness, climbed up, and up again, and up again, your mind's full of *up*. No end to this ladder that might reach to heaven this moment she heaved, such a terrible heave, not a thought of where that fish might be, not a thought of her grey-black, make a whole sea shudder. Ah, let her go to a sea then, she wanted to go, this damn grey thing called ship.

"Easy," I said, more mumble than cry, "the skin's off my whole back."

"Climb, and shut up, so long's it's not off your behind."

"Wait."

The tenderness in that voice, never think it a man's, full and grown and hard as steel is, "Wait," he cried, "Wait."

So we waited for him. An arm hanging off, you could feel it in darkness. We lashed it with yarn, and then went on climbing. Not a word from us then, just breathing and hard,

then breathing again, lungs swelling to burst, frenzey's hold in a finger. God, how we climbed and climbed and climbed.

Think of a mountain, and then another, put that one on top, add another, it was higher, higher than that, seemed never to end. She gave another lurch then, just like that ship was drunk, and heavy with it, heavy with drink even like a man is, not caring much, not giving a damn, she'd this date with a sea. Now she had it, now that fish was gone, this sea was all hers. Never mind a sailor, anyhow, he can float on water, and steel can't, steel won't, let her go, down and as deep down as she wants to go. We knew what to do, each man could cry, "*Out*," cry, "*Out* of this ship," but not from fear, only from sense, a sailor's right hand.

Then we reached that ladder top, we came to a landing, another, then one more to be climbed. Only shouts in our ears, not a smell of the sea, nor a peek at the darkness, just went on climbing. The one with the arm lashed to his body cried out, we took the strain on his weight, we knew he'd go right out and maybe fall, take others with him, right back below. What power there was in the un-harmed arm, what a clutch. We took the weight, and slowly we pushed him up. Slowly we went up, up, up. All the time you could feel the throb of her, and shake and reel of her, but her heart was stopped, she'd eaten up all the speed that ever would come to her, we felt these last trembles, our minds clinging fast to a single word, *out*, our minds kept crying, *out*. Such a bellow came down to us then.

"Oh God! We're out! We're clear! O smell, smell the air here, smell it, man, we're full clear of that hole."

We smelt it, we breathed it in, we clung to a man, and we were out. Now she didn't heave or tremble, no cry or moan from her, she knew it had come, now she was motionless like she was taking a rest, only darkness seemed moving. How the air was shaking with all the shoutings of men.

"Where's a boat, oh where's a boat, oh any damned boat?"

"Hold hard to that man," another cried, very close to us he

was, but we couldn't see what man he was, nor think of a name to him.

"Hold to him hard."

We held hard, this one could not tussle with a sea. And we got him out, on to a deck, not flat, but crazily listed, like it meant to storm heights before it touched depths. We hung on to our man.

"Can't see a boat," one said.

"Can't see nothing at all," another said.

She heaved over, yes sir, just as though she'd heard what we were saying, heard a cry from men for something to cling on to in a black sea.

She heaved again, this time she heaved hard and triumphant, she threw us clear. All five to the sea. Then she went fast, her old nose rose high, then down it went, and she was all gone.

Tossed fifteen days in a sea, tossing away fifteen days, in the middle of this sea, like you'd never had a foothold on any earth at all, like you belonged nowhere, just like you had never belonged anywhere.

Here it is, sailor, here it is. Size it up, get a feel on it, hold it, oh embrace it all, sailor, all the whole lot of a great silent sea, there toss and there wait, there freeze or burn, and climb those dizzy walls, and those silent walls, and hear the heave and ho of this little boat, the grind of hell, here on this sea once walked flat by a man in the long ago, you can think of that, or you can think of something else, these fifteen days, so slowly turning these days, what enormity in the wheel they slowly turn on. Tossed away fifteen days and then we were picked up, yes, we were picked up. A fine morning, and a beautiful morning, I remember it well. And then we sailed home.

CHAPTER IX

FIRST thing I saw as I was coming down that gangway was that smiling woman. This time she had the bit of green to her, since all this town was green, all this port we sailed to, oh green and fair, and all that country green. Yes, there she was, that one from Sailor's street, and smiling at me.

"I'll unfreeze you," she said.

This time I walked past her, walked right past her and home. Here there was news. About my mother it was. She's gone and far, well beyond my reach, and then it couldn't matter any more because she wouldn't mind what sea I was on, and I'd always belonged to a sea. Straightaway I came to that port again, drew my money and lay idle, they'd said we might.

"Get normal again," they said.

"Get a steadiness in the nerves."

"That old fever of fifteen days, get it out of your system."

"Lay to," they said, and we lay to.

"Take it easy and free," they said, "shed away an experience, get an even keel again, make ready for another bout with the sea."

So I lay idle. From this pub to that pub I was going, and having a drink here and a drink there, and all the time this smiling woman was behind me. Keen on unfreezing me, warming me up. I said never a word, looked another way, thought another thought, my feet weren't carrying me round and round for nothing, I was bent on something, something I'd been thinking about for a long time, and this made me think of that grey ship going down, first thought of marrying as I filled barrows for Scruff.

That's where my feet were taking me, many a girl I passed, some were pretty and comely, and some were not too pretty, but good lookers all the same, some had a hard itch for a sailor, you could tell at a glance. And at last I found her, she was coming my way as I came out of "The Cable." Lord, my

eyes when I saw her, so pretty and fair, Lord, she was pretty Yes, sir, and seeing her just near this place called "The Cable," I sort of knew my own cable would be down and well down pretty soon, every link of it down. More pretty than pretty she was, younger than me, I could tell that at once, and she gave me a smile.

And by that smile I knew I had her. She was mine. All my life I'd been looking for one like her. My heart fair bubbled. She'd big grey eyes, and that rare softness to the skin you find in this green country, and rosy cheeks, and a little mouth born to smiling. I was thinking fast then.

If only she'll marry me, why, I'm as happy as happy, give a damn to a sea. She wasn't known by any of the names I'd been calling to girls, calling to girls in every one of those dreams I'd had aboard that grey ship. Her name was Sheila. That was fine, I thought, I saw her again and again. Soon I was taking her out, then hearing her say, "Well, next trip I'll marry you."

Came from a little farm on a hill. So straightaway I said, "Lord! why where I was born there used to be a hill, too, and the sea at her foot."

I hugged her hard. That was the first time anything ever came true for me in my *whole* life. I married her, and she married me, we were one. And I was proud, sirs, oh I was proud that day. And what a night it was, mates came along, more and more of them, we drank and we sang, we laughed and laughed, give a damn to the sea, how we laughed, and some were cheering. Once again a whole world was shining. Never felt a coldness again, not like I'd felt it, no never again.

Time to be going. Time to go. "Aye," I said, "that's how it is, Sheila, away you come, and away we go." Cried a bit at that, who wouldn't, coming away with a sailorman, leaving that little place, saying good-bye to a hill and that green of sea,

same as I'd said good-bye to hill and sea outside my window.

"That's how it is," I said, "a sailor goes where ships are, and what's here's nothing, all right for crabs, and little boys, but not men's ships," so away we went. She did a bit of crying again, she couldn't help that, I even loved her more for it, she knew what green was, and what softness in the air is, and that sweep of deep green to a hill.

"I came from a hill myself," I said, "they used to call me, 'Johnny from the Hill.' "

I wiped her eyes, packed quick, that boat of mine was lying away over a stretch of green water, she was waiting for me. Had to go.

Our home wasn't big, yet it wasn't too small, it was hard by a dock, open a window or door, and there was the sea. It seemed right like that, both to me and to Sheila. Look out this way or that, there was always a ship, always some smoke from a funnel, a sound from a horn, voices of sailors coming and going. That seemed right, too. How happy I was, how happy she was, oh, but she was far happier, and times without number she told me this. And I loved her saying it, every time she said it my heart could melt.

But how she watched a clock, and how I watched her watch it. I'd think her brain counting that tick and tock, knew her heart feeling that tick and tock towards an hour when I'd sail. Each time I thought of that hour, how sure it would grow, that hour for going. And loving her more as it ticked and tocked. Twenty times a day said it.

"I love you, Sheila, I love you, love you," a hundred times, a thousand, and all the time this clock ticking and tocking out of it, tick tock, just like great feet treading along towards that hour I'd go.

The night before we sailed we went out walking, came to a bridge, and there we stood, there were so many things to watch, not least a river that led out to a sea. See it stretch right out there, see boys fishing at a quay's edge, for what they'd never find, though they didn't know that,

hear the shouting and laughing out of them as they finished. Watch junk float away under that bridge, riff and raff from boats just finished unloading, orange peeling all over a patch of water, bits of cork and jettisoned belts, bits of wood, many a man's letters, tiny shreds of letters, floating out to a sea. Get the smell of sea, salt tang in a wind, smell rope and yarn, stink of oil.

We never spoke, just leaned on that bridge, looking out, looking down. She squeezed my hand suddenly, and then I knew she wasn't really looking at a river or a sea, or any man's ship, nor thinking about them, nor feeling about them. She squeezed my hand again.

When I stood myself erect and looked down at her, she said, "I hate all this, let's go along this way."

Off we went, pacing fine and free. In those moments I could not hear a single tick or tock of that clock. After a while we stopped, stopped dead in a street. How she smiled into that shop window, how her face lighted up, a great warmth to me. Straightaway we went inside and I bought her a hat. How happy she was.

All the same, it came, you couldn't stop it coming, this hour of my sailing. Sudden, and when you weren't thinking about it, that sudden it came. God, but she clung hard to me that early morning. Foggy looking outside a window, we heard that fog-horn blowing, I thought it might be raining before tide time. How she clung to me, I felt I'd never again be free of such a hold. Yet how warm it was, years of warmth there, all saved up for me, aye, ages and ages of warmth, clinging hard to a man.

"Let me go down," she said, "I want to go down." She wanted to go, down to a ship, wanted to bid me good-bye.

"All right," I said, "you'll go down. Now pack me my bag."

I sat there and I watched her pack it. Believe it or not, but I did, yes sir, I believed well and truly as I watched her pack, that all her warmth went into it, and all her fine love

for me, her whole heart, her whole soul went into it, as she packed thing after thing in. I remember my great boots, how she crushed them well down, a sort of fierceness to her. She cried. I sat there, felt thick and awkward in the mouth, words came up, jumble about my tongue, the weight of lead to them. I could not speak. Not for a whole minute or more could I say anything, and at last I said, "Cry, Sheila, cry darling, it'll do you good."

Had the measure of her, and she knew I knew this. All this was strange to her, all this was new, watching her man go to a ship, so on to a sea.

"There," she said, "there! It's packed, and it's finished," her eyes were aflood.

I jumped up and I took her in my arms again. God! How I felt then.

Can't say how, can't say just how it was, or what it was, I can't describe it. I just held and held. All the time she ticked, that confounded clock.

"Sheila," I said, "if I don't sail away, then how can I sail home," put my finger under her chin, I raised up her face, "then how can I sail home if I don't sail away?"

Never a word from her, not one, only a sound, all of a sigh in it. And sure enough it found its way right down inside me.

"Oh God, I hate your going," she said then.

I did not answer. I felt her tremble there, couldn't say anything, nothing at all. Then after a while I took her over to a corner by the fire and made her sit down. Had to watch a clock, think of a ship, had to think of a sea. I took the rope's length from the table, I wound and lashed my bag, secure and fast, and then I flung it into a corner. I went over to where she was sitting, I put my arm round her.

"It's hard going," I said, "but it can't be helped and it must be done. That's how it is for a sailor, and for the woman that loves him. I'll soon be home again, Sheila," I said, and as I was saying, this I got a bit easy in my mind. "Come on," I

said, "before I go let's have a drink, just one little drink. Drink a health to what's coming."

She went away and got what was left of some whisky in a bottle, then we added hot water to it, and a bit of sugar, and we drank to each other's health and we drank to "one fine day soon." We wished for all the best that would be coming, and would be good. I'd an idea what that might be, but I said nothing. Wouldn't be wise, I knew it wouldn't be wise.

Seven by the clock, she saw it, I saw it, and it was me who spoke. Slow it came, but it came.

"It's time, Sheila, it's time for me to go. Yes," I said, "it's time to go."

At that the clock struck, it had the weight of a fist in its strokes, those strokes of seven in the morning. She got herself dressed for the street, and I went and put on my cap and coat. Now I was really off, and nothing surer than that. That fog-horn blew still.

She cried a bit, I took no notice, you get over these things, and she'd get it over, over and done with. You said to yourself, "Ah! it's nothing, really," saying this you got an added weight to your resolve. After I'd swung my bag outside the street door, I put out the gas light, then as soon as she came out I locked all doors, banged the front one and handed her the key. Remember a look on her face as she watched me swing the bag to my shoulder, I learned something from that look, never forgot it, and never will. We went away down the street then, we said nothing to each other, what could you say, we didn't want to anyhow, and even if we did, where were the words to say what you really felt, couldn't be found, gone, all gone, hid away under a great weight of feeling, heavy on her, heavy on her and me. We got to the end of that street, then took a sharp turn round the corner.

"What a lot of walls to this place," she said, but I said nothing. "Oh, the walls in this place," she said again, and I said nothing.

I was saying things in my mind, saying good-bye to Sheila,

good-bye to the house, to that street and that road, good-bye, good-bye, and all the time we were drawing nearer and nearer to a parting. At last I saw that ship. Made me laugh inside me this getting a fresh look to her shape, it would be clearer in half an hour when she had the full morning light. But what a tub of a boat, I wondered why I'd signed in her at all, what an old cockleshell of a thing she really was, her dumpy funnel didn't seem right no ways, like a funnel never grown up, or able to stand high, take a weight of steam out of her pipe.

I hadn't heard her blow, that set me wondering about what kind of a blow she really had. Sheila clung on to my arm, feel it there every blessed second as we drew nearer and nearer to that dock. And at last we were there, going down her shed, coming bump up against a crowd of men, all sailors due and bound for this tub of a boat. We watched them mounting the gangway, this cockleshell boat, this thing called *Trinity*.

I dropped my bag to the ground as we came up against her gangway head. She'd not spoken a word all this long walk down to a boat, save a word about walls, but what about walls, it's time to go to a sea. I took her hand in mine, we talked to each other in whispers, for others were passing us by, going aboard this ship. Dockers were coming down, her hatch-covers were being put on, tarpaulins lashed down fast to her combings, wedges struck home and those derricks being tidied away.

"Ah, well," I said, "Sheila," I said, "now don't you go worrying, and don't be thinking about anything except me, all the time I'll be gone, every single minute I'm gone." That much I loved her.

"All the time I'll be thinking of you," she said, "and all the time I'll be hating your being gone, and your going now."

"Cheer up," I said, forcing a laugh out of me, "cheer up," my head bent low over her, my voice lower still.

"Sheila," I said, "let me sing a little song in your ear, a song that is a sailor's song, and sung with a fine heart by sailormen, that they've sung many a time, and always will, and always the same."

Straightaway I was humming into her ear, this sailor song. To her and for her. "Listen," I said, and she caught both my hands in her own, as I talked down to her ear, my mouth touching it the while.

"There's a big time and a broad time and a good time and a gay time and a fine time and a gold time coming to you. Now good-bye," I said.

"God take care of you, darling," she said. My heart heaved then. She went her way then, and I mine. In an hour I'd sailed away.

CHAPTER X

"A FINE time and a gay time and a gold time coming to you," she said, and then she walked away from that ship, and up a long shed, and on to a road.

"He'll be sitting in that foc'sle now."

She went on walking, by this street and that street.

"Soon I'll hear her horn blow."

And then she wasn't thinking anything, or feeling anything, just went on walking.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," she said, and looking round she saw this woman beside her.

"You've a man in the *Trinity*?"

"Yes, I've a man in her," she said.

"By the look of you you're new to this place and to a sea."

She said yes she was, still looking ahead, and then she thought, "Any minute now that horn'll blow," thinking of him changing his clothes and going down below to the fires.

They crossed the road, and here all was a bigness, everything big, and everything moving. Look up and you'll see how high those buildings stand, look down and here are vans and cars and lorries and trains, many a mile of them moving, and always moving. They went on walking, and here buildings were even higher, choke space, one day they'll be the death of air.

"So you've a man in the *Trinity*, too?" she said, looking direct at the other.

"Oh yes, twenty years and more," the old woman said, and always the same job."

"What job?"

"Firing a ship."

"Johnny's firing, too."

"Is that his name?"

"Yes, but I call him golden Johnny."

"Too pretty for a man," the old woman said. "Oh, that's too pretty a name for any man," and she came to a halt.

Sheila looked at her but she said nothing, seeing an old woman beshawled, hands clutching this, all knuckles these hands, and she stared hard at them. A bright red tram came rattling down and stopped right in front of them.

"My way's due South," the old woman said, and Sheila helped her on.

"Good morning."

"Mornin' to you."

The tram went away, and she went on up the road. And again she was feeling nothing, and seeing nothing, only listening hard, then suddenly that horn was blowing.

"He's away, away," she said, and the sound followed after her as she walked. "He's gone, he's away."

She turned one corner and then another, and here was the street. Shut that door, shut out that blow, and shut out a sea. She went straight upstairs. There were his clothes scattered about just like he had gone out of the room for a moment and would soon be back. She began folding them up, put them tidy in a drawer. Here was the room shared with him, now he's gone and this room is where you dream. She went downstairs.

Her hands were busy, tidying up, putting this and that to rights, what he'd call making ship-shape, still not thinking anything or feeling anything, only her hands living, and always moving, and soon it was so tidy he might never have been there at all. The kitchen was warm, and by the fire the two chairs, the

one he'd sat in and her own. Here was your world, here was where you waited. Wait. Dream.

Look out through a window and you see a wall, and beyond that a sea, that's where his ship is now, *Trinity* her name is, she moves towards an ocean, and that ocean's green, but what's an ocean to you save the weight of a great stone, lies heavy as you wait, falls away from you when he's hard bound and home. And in the next house one waits, and her ship is *Thespis*, and in the next again, her ship *Hercules*, and on and on up this street, all men away to a sea and women waiting. You are one with them. But you're new to this place and to a sea, and waiting is greyness. She moved things on the mantelpiece that had no need to be moved, pushed this and pushed that, lifted this and put it down again, not thinking anything and not feeling anything, she was all hands.

"I'll give the whole house a thorough clean down."

She picked up brushes and dusters and polishers then went upstairs. "I'll begin with this room."

Think nothing and hear nothing, say nothing and feel nothing this first day he's gone. Just work, clean well and clean again, anything to keep these hands moving, how alive they are. Here was their room, a small world, pygmy to that outside giant, how immense this city was after what you had left. Hearing a strange sound she stopped and looked up at the window, and suddenly a flutter of wing and a seagull sweeping past her, a quick wild touch upon order, and something was awake in her, an ache to clutch at this. She picked up her cloth and went on polishing.

"Next time that horn blows he'll be home."

And her hands were moving, always moving. When she was finished this room, she went to the next. She stood for a moment looking at the window curtains. "They're the ones he liked, the blue ones. I'll take them down and put them on the front window. Funny how he liked the blue in them."

He was well gone now, the house as quiet as mice are, and all this day yours, and the next, and each one the same. She

took down the curtains and went below with them. "They'll be far down the river now. I wonder if he's thinking of me.

"Yes, I'm new to this place and to a sea, and next Friday I'll be going down to that big office to get Johnny's money, and there'll be any God's amount of sailors' women there, too, and I'll get to know them all."

Suddenly her hands stopped moving, she was finished. This room was cleaned, and that room, the whole house through was cleaned, nothing more you could do. In the kitchen she sat down, and again she realised how quiet it was, so quiet it could be felt, put out your hand and you can touch it. No wind and not a horn blown, not a sound in this street, and looking through the window she could see the afternoon light beginning to go and the great wall outside softening down to shadow. She knew then that she was alone.

"He might be away three months, might be six, and then again a whole year. You never can tell with a ship, and that ship rarely trusts a sea, that's what he said and I suppose that's right."

She poked the fire, she fidgeted in the chair, she watched a clock. Outside it was growing dark and the big wall had melted away to nothing.

"I suppose he'll be far down the river by this time, that ship moving fast, they say they all do once they get the touch on a sea," and she got up and drew the curtains, then lit the gas. She could see other curtains being drawn, and she thought she saw a face peeping out at her. Keep your hands moving. Always a going-away day is long, longest of them all. Again she went upstairs, again came down, wondering why she had done this. Then she fell to staring at this and that object on the kitchen dresser, and suddenly she was moving things again.

"Somehow I can't settle down inside myself."

"There's the evening paper under the door. I could sit down and read that."

"I could go to bed. I could lie there and think hard about him."

"I could get dressed and go out, get lost in that big city. I could do all those things."

"There's the blow of a horn now, but it's not his blow."

"I wonder when this terrible war'll be over, I wonder on that."

"May God calm every mile of sea his ship takes him along."

She was in the chair again, poking the fire, not thinking about the fire, but where he might be at this hour, turned seven of the clock. He said, "You'll find it strange here, and all those women strange, but they're good, some of them good women, and that's everything."

He said laughing, "And watch out when you go down the maze of streets and roads, and turning all those corners, you might get lost. I once knew a woman went off to see her husband and each time she came round the corner of a street there's the big stern of a ship hitting her in the face, like she could never get away from what she wanted to get away from, that hated day, that going-away day all women hate."

He said, "Every minute I'll be thinking of you, and of that fine time coming."

"It's quiet now just as he said it would be."

"Laughing again, he said. Well that's as it should be. A sailor must sail away or else how can he sail home, and that's the fine time when he sails home. He said, 'I'll be thinking of you every single minute of the day.' "

"I've done nothing the whole day and yet I feel tired." She dropped the poker on to the hearth, got up and locked all doors.

"I don't feel hungry and I don't feel thirsty." She went upstairs.

She lay and she thought of him, wished this war was over, and all ships hard bound and home, all seas and oceans dried up and an end to going away. She had a touch on him, could feel him all over, he was with her, bone to bone and flesh to flesh. She fell asleep that way.

Eight o'clock in this street and all curtains are drawn back, and here is the day. Look out of a window and see a wall,

and beyond that a sea. She opened the window and put her head out. This air is still, not a sound heard, the light is soft on you and on that sea. There's a horn blowing, breaking down all this silence, yet it's not the horn of his ship. She shut down the window, got dressed and went down to light the fire.

"I wonder where he is at this moment, I wonder what he's doing now."

"When I've had my breakfast I think I'll go out."

There was a knock at the door. Wondering who it could be she went and opened it.

"Good morning, ma'am."

"Good morning," she said, drew wide the door. "Do come inside," she said. She made way for her.

A tall woman and thin, hands clutching sleeves of a long coat, she stared around the kitchen, noting its tidiness, not a speck of dust. "This girl is strange to this place," she thought. She sat down in the chair offered to her.

"You've a man in the *Trinity*?" she said.

"Yes, have you, too?"

"No! Mine's in the *Thespis*, but it's the same people as own her and to-day is the day for drawing money in that line."

"To-day? I thought it was Friday," Sheila said.

"It's to-day," the woman said, and she looked the girl up and down, then up and down again. A smile came on her thin face. "You've been dreaming," she said.

"I'd better get ready," Sheila said.

"You didn't mind my calling, did you. I saw you seeing him off yesterday and I liked the look of you somehow. I never make friends much now. I thought you mightn't know your way around, dear," she said, and all the time her fingers were plucking the edges of her sleeve. "You'll find this a big place, I know you don't belong here, we all know that, news gets about, you might get lost in a big place. You didn't mind my callin' did you?"

"Lord no," Sheila said. "I won't be a minute," and left the kitchen. She was downstairs again inside ten minutes.

"You look nice in your blue hat and your blue coat," the woman said. They went out and down the street.

"We could walk or we could take a tram, but I like to walk," the woman said.

"We'll walk," Sheila said, and turning the corner they found themselves on a long road, and ahead of them other women were walking the same way, so you could tell this was advance note day for some ships. A slight wind got up, blew it across the river. Sheila buttoned up her coat.

"So you've a man in the *Thespis*," Sheila said, and at that the woman stopped.

"No, dear, he's in the *Aranian*," the thin woman said, and Sheila said quickly, "But you said he was in the *Thespis*."

"No, dear, the *Aranian*," and then they were silent as they crossed the road.

And here was all that bigness again, and buildings stretching higher and yet higher as you moved nearer to the centre of the city. And here was a sea of sound, and looking at the buildings, hearing the sounds Sheila felt them as two long lanes, and she was shut in by these, then suddenly she could see nothing of a sea, only its smell came up to her, and the smells that ships brought back with them from all over the world. Still they were silent, and glimpsing this thin woman out of the corner of her eye she noticed that she kept staring at the big white stones over which they walked.

"It's a lovely morning," Sheila said, but the woman said nothing. They crossed another road, turned down a short street, and there were still women ahead, and theirs was the same direction, this morning all women were due South.

"I've never seen such tall buildings," Sheila said, but the thin woman said nothing.

"First she says her man's in the *Thespis*, then she says no, he's in the *Aranian*," Sheila thought, and all the time the woman was looking at the street stones as though she might be counting them.

"So you've a man in the *Trinity*," the thin woman broke silence at last.

"Yes, he's in that ship, I often wonder if it's a good ship," Sheila said.

"Mine's in the *Truculent*," the thin woman said.

"The *Truculent*?"

"Yes, the *Truculent*. This way, catch hold of my coat, it's dangerous crossing this road," the thin woman said.

Cars and vans and traps, lorries and trams came by, they were in and out of these, snake-like, they were across this newer road.

"Not far now," the thin woman said.

"Three ships named," thought Sheila. "Her memory must be very bad, three ships named and her man might be on all of them the way she names them."

A clock struck the hour of ten and Sheila looked up.

"I wonder what time they cash the advance notes," she said, and the woman said, "Any time, any time at all."

Sheila looked closely at her. How tall and how thin she was, not much of face to be seen behind that drawn-up collar, and those fingers were long and white and ever clutching those coat sleeves.

"I stop here," the thin woman said.

They were by a place called "The Star and Garter."

"Are you going in?" Sheila said.

"Yes, I always do. Are you? This is a long road, isn't it?"

"Very long," Sheila said.

"Walked it many a time," the thin woman said. "Let's go inside."

They went in, a barman brought the thin woman a drop of port in a glass.

"Hello," he said, cheery, smiling, like he'd known her all his life.

"What for you, miss?" he said, "and what for you?"

"Nothing," Sheila said. She could not take her eyes off her companion.

She clutched her glass of port, she was mumbling to herself.

"Count years here, count days, watch him go out winter or

summer, in the early morning, to an old boat, not his boat, never could be, never could be his own boat, never a thoughtful man, never a tidy mind, harum scarum in those days. Tall and manly going out, saying, Good-bye now, watching him go off, his new suit shining on him, and that bag I scrubbed, communion white those mornings, wet or fine. Heard that horn blow, God's grace with him those going-away mornings. And then he was gone. And then I'm thinking where he'll be, down iron steps, on landings, turning here, and a turn there, watching his step, down, down past steel walls like these walls, deeper down and down again then, hell's hole and this hole and a flood of water between us. Gone, all gone, quick like a knife struck and like a bird flying away from you."

"There's half-past ten striking now," Sheila said, looking at the thin woman, her port untouched, her fingers clutching the glass, and the cheery barman no longer cheery, just standing behind his counter watching her seated there.

"Night before sailing we'd be laughing, drink an old time in, then away early to bed, always early to bed the night before sailing, winding the clock up as he tread stairs, never a minute late on sailing day, never a minute, always in time for an old boat, not his boat, and never could be his boat, never a man for putting the rag of a sail together that could fly on something, take me with him and sail away to some new place out of this old place. Then comes that sailing-away morning. Heard the horn blow, heard a bell ring, cleaned up after he'd gone, cleaned out his old pipes and hung them up, tidied up his old corner. Away he went. Never had enough of sea.

"'Time we sailed away to a different sea,' I said. 'Greying at the temples you are.' Watched him going up that gangway, head bent forward, he must have been thinking of me behind him, thinking of his fire, perhaps, going down to it again. I'd wait then, and he'd turn, wave a hand at me, I'd wave him back, he'd go. Knew how hard he worked, knew how much he thought about me, thought of those very things as I was going back up the big shed. Back up I went then, through the great

gate, along this road, oh how long, many times walked. . . .”

“It's nearly a quarter to eleven,” Sheila said, “nearly a quarter to.”

“Up this street and up the other one, round this corner, then round another one. I'd say to myself how long this road is, how high these buildings, all these great places shooting up everywhere you went. I'd say, how high this wall is, never thinking it met another one, these joined as one, met another one, so stretching far.”

“We must go,” Sheila said, wondering if the thin woman was ill, wondering what made her name so many ships and her husband sailing on all of them. “There! Nearly eleven o'clock,” she said, half rising. “Listen, we'll be late.” She put her hand on the thin woman's arm, but she did not seem to notice, and the barman still looked on but he said nothing.

“I was just fixing up a new rack I'd bought for his old pipes when the knock came on the door and I opened it and there was a man standing there, and I could tell at once he was full of something to say, but I said at once, “Don't say it,” and he said, “Ah well, missus, he was fair fallen, fair fallen.”

“I was just fixing up this nice rack for his pipes,” I said, and he said again, “He was fair fallen,” and I said, “Go away now,” and he went away. I said to myself I could put on my coat and hat and go up the street, past Tilson's shop, and then come to “The Mermaid,” and I'd hear them laughing away in there, all the men from the sea, behind the frosted windows, think of him then. But I didn't do anything. Just sat there. The fire wanted poking but I never poked it, and somebody knocked, but I never bothered about that either, and then when I saw some of his old things I said, “I'll roll the whole lot up now and put them away.” And then I said, “I'll hear that horn blow and I'll know what it says, and that'll be Gone, Gone.”

“Oh, I'm su: we'll be late,” Sheila said. “Do come.”

“Oh, he wasn't too good and he wasn't too bad either,” this fellow said, and again I said, “Go away from me will you, will

you go away from me, and I wasn't looking at him any more, only at the new pipe rack I'd bought against his coming home.

"Ah, but he fell fair, missus," he said, "fell fair." I kept wondering on that. And then I said out loud, *Am I dreaming?* No! I wasn't dreaming. All that weight gone off me, all that rubbing on a bone gone. Then I cried, "Oh, feel, feel, this might yet be dream day. But no, it wasn't."

"Listen! Listen to the clock now," Sheila said, and again she was half rising out of the seat and pulling this woman's arm, who would not move, every stroke of this clock might be a weight and she is held by this. "I *must* go," Sheila said, knowing she would not go, she was hard fast to this woman, and to all that she was. "Do come, *please*, we'll be late."

And the barman watched, but he said nothing.

"Fair fallen," this feller said.

"Tissin and tossing away in a far ocean," I said. "Lord Jesus Christ!"

That horn blew, that horn said, "He's gone, and all gone." And many a thing went with it. All that clutching at straws, all that fever of a name, name of a ship he's hard fast in, and all that weight of ocean, and this and that sea, and all its thunderous sounds, gone, gone. No name of a ship to think of any more, and no pillow to clutch, and no thinking in the night time, and going on thinking till your mind's a whirl, and then it's light and you're up out of bed, and then he's gone, where you don't know, daren't ask, but you can wonder through every murdering hour. Always I felt the weight *here*, round where a child sucks, always felt it there. That feller was staring at me and then he said, "Well, missus, you don't seem at all to be moved," and I said, "I can't be moved any more, and besides I'm sick and worn out with being moved. Let ships come in by ten and thousands, it means nothing to me."

"Fair, missus, be fair, many a good man got home this day," he said.

"Call this day great if you like, and all the air in it silk,

and all the sounds in it golden sounds, it means nothing to me. Then he went away at last and I was glad."

Suddenly she stopped, picked up her glass and drained it at a gulp. She stood up, looked over at the barman, and Sheila saw him wink at the tall thin woman.

"Ready now," Sheila said, and the woman said, "I'm always ready."

They left "The Star and Garter" and continued on their way. Sheila said nothing, she couldn't think of anything to say, as if all the words were used up, there were no words left for her to use.

They crossed another road. The tall woman clutched Sheila's arm, she said, "Careful, be careful, dear, this corner's dangerous."

"Is it very far to get to the country from here?" she asked.

The thin woman looked down at her. "The country," she said. "Well, you can take a fivepenny ticket on a green tram and that'd take you to the country, but it wouldn't be nice this time of year."

Traffic thickened, many more people were about and all were hurrying so you thought this was the busiest city in the world. They crossed yet another road.

"Well, well! So you've a man in the *Trinity*. My own man's been greasing away in the *Dernian* for fifteen years now," the thin woman said, but Sheila said nothing.

A tram roared by, they went down a narrow alley, came out, a great building yawned out at them. And this was the place.

"It's just half eleven striking now," Sheila said. "I don't think we're very late after all, and she wasn't thinking of this woman and her husband sailing half a dozen ships at the same time, only where Johnny would be, now two whole days in a sea. They crushed their way through a crowd of women who were coming out of the big black door. One and another said good morning and it's a nice day, and one asked how her man was and another said, "Old Miserable's doling out the money

to-day." Sheila's mind began to spin. Together they went inside.

She stared up at walls, she was in a long corridor, and she thought these walls were beautiful, like a long lane to Paradise.

"I wonder which window I go to," she said.

"Any window, dear, I always choose any window at all," and taking Sheila's hand she drew her on. "This one will do," she said.

A little man in a grey suit looked out at her, and like the barman he smiled as though he, too, had known her for many a year, then he waved a tiny hand and said, "dear, dear, next please."

Sheila went up. "Name and ship," he said, and Sheila watched the small hand bury itself in a mountain of money, and this might be any common thing like sand or sugar or rubbish the way he moved his hand about in the heap.

"Manion," she said. "*Trinity*," she said.

"Four pounds ten," he said, and there it was.

She picked it up, the notes were new and made crinkly noises, she crushed them in a purse in a quick, fierce sort of way, her eyes were searching about for her companion, and then she saw her.

This corridor was long, beautifully white and green, and many doors polished and shining, and what you walked on was marble and it had blue veins in it. From window to window and from door to door she watched her go. She moved slowly after her, thought she might be ill, thought she herself might be ill, might be dreaming, as she watched the tall thin woman go from window to window. Now she was behind her. She listened, she heard.

First window: "Well, well, you again."

Second window: "Tut, tut," and a hand waving.

Third window: "Hello, hello," boisterously as though she were a visitor from a far region.

Fourth window: "Here she is again, Dick. I thought that doorman had his orders?"

Fifth window: "Now now, my dear woman." Wave her away.

The sixth window and the seventh, and at each a smile, a waving hand.

Suddenly the tall thin woman turned round and saw her. She came right up. "I wondered where you were. Did you draw your husband's money?"

"Yes, I did."

"I never seem able to get mine. They say each time I come down I name a different ship, and then they laugh at that."

"Let's go now," Sheila said.

"Wait," the thin woman said. And in a fierce whisper, "There's one of those fine gentlemen. He doesn't know me, but I know him. Once I talked to him, had to talk, because I was wondering whether my man was fair-fallen or not, and then he was on so many ships and all of the same line. That morning I met this gentleman and I said good morning, and he said good morning. Then I said, You are one of the fine gentlemen owning an old boat, oh many an old boat? And I said would you know a man by the name of Joseph Crilley, and he said no he wouldn't. He was in a dreadful hurry to be off somewhere, and I just thought how odd it was, my man in those boats twenty years or more and this fine man didn't know him, and then I walked away."

She was pointing towards the lift outside of which a short stocky man was standing, an umbrella in his hand, and he kept pressing the button for the lift to come down, he was impatient, this might be the last lift on earth.

"Let's go now," Sheila said, her mind a whirl. "Let's go."

Wanting to go and not wanting to go, wanting to be home, and wanting to hold fast to this tall thin woman. "Come along," she said, and dragged the tall woman after her, and then they were at the big door. She saw the doorman with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking to and fro on his heels, and he never once glanced at the tall thin woman, and never once glanced at her. They were out.

"Oh!" Sheila exclaimed. "That's done and over. Shall we take a tram?"

"I like always to walk," the thin woman said. "I like to walk along this old road, but you ride, dear, if you want to." She was clutching at her sleeves again.

Two women passed them by, both looked at her, knowingly smiled, but did not look at Sheila.

"I'm sure something's wrong," Sheila thought. "She looks ill, I wonder where she lives, shall I take a tram, I wonder what Johnny's doing now."

They were walking steadily along, arm in arm, and she seemed hardly to notice it, they might be walking on air. They crossed a street. "He was in the *Truculent*, Joe was, but one day I said to him, you can be too long in the one ship, and he agreed, so he left her and went on to one they call the *Hesperides* or something, and that's where he is now. But they don't believe a word out of my mouth down at that pay office, I often wonder why, careful here, dear, careful here, oh, don't I know this road and these stones, each and every one of them the shape and the look of them and the feel of them under my feet. There! We're over. So you've a man in the *Trinity*," she said.

"Yes," Sheila said, "he sailed yesterday, and he said he might be away six months and he might be a year, he couldn't say rightly," and this was the sixth time the thin woman had asked her if she had a man in the *Trinity*, and Sheila said yes, as though it were the first time she had been asked.

"My man was in the *Glow-worm*, too," the thin woman said. "Glows away and far down somewhere now, and I'd another who was the first child by him, but not like his father, small and on the heavy side, fair as fair, couldn't hold him either. Some say heart holds, but nothing holds when a sea pulls. Away he went and there it is."

"We cross here," Sheila said. "Where do you live?"

"I'll show you," the woman said, and the clutch on Sheila's arm tightened. They turned into a long street, half-way down

this they stopped. Again it was outside a pub, and this was called "The Roysterer." "I go in here," she said.

"All right," Sheila said, aching to be home, quiet, alone, but could not leave this woman. They were in the back parlour and Sheila rang the bell.

"What will you have, dear?"

"Nothing, thank you," Sheila said, Johnny large in her mind, clouding out woman and pub and all the world. "Nothing," she said again, like a person suddenly wakened from dreaming. "No, I don't want anything, thank you very much."

"Hello, hello, hello," the barman cried, a wisp of a man, all apron and moustache, and already he had what the woman wanted. Sheila saw it in his hand as though he had actually been waiting for her. "Here you are, lady." He put down the glass, winked at Sheila, then went away. She sat quite still. She thought, "Wake up, wake up, all this is dreaming."

It was like this woman was completely alone, she was not there, barman had vanished, that's how she looked to Sheila as she sat at the table holding the glass.

"You must come and see me, dear," she said. "You're new here, and you're new to the ways of a sea, and I could tell you some helpful things."

She sipped slowly at her glass. It was gone half-past twelve by the clock.

"I'll have to go," Sheila said. "It's late, look at the time."

"I know, I know, don't say it, it's the waiting that's worst of all. Many a time I've wondered why Joe never wrote, all the ships he's been in he never wrote, and the fair one never wrote either. But I daresay he finds it hard firing in the *Aranian*."

She finished her drink, then got up, her hands suddenly vanished inside the capacious coat sleeves and, looking at her now, Sheila thought she had grown a little taller. Erect, dignified, this woman moved towards the door, and Sheila behind her. The swing door pushed back, she went out.

"A minute, a minute, missy," the barman said, he was holding on to the sleeve of Sheila's coat.

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

Smiling behind his grey moustache the barman whispered, "Just a bit odd, just a bit odd, everybody knows her?"

"Who?"

"Her, of course! Always likes to hang on to somebody, just like you'd hang on to a bit of fire to get warm, everybody knows her, she's all right, but just a bit odd. Goes down regularly to draw money, though her husband and son went long, long ago. But she's all right, missy, she wouldn't harm you or anything," and as though in confirmation of this fact he gave Sheila's hand a squeeze.

"Mornin'," he said.

"Morning," Sheila said.

"There you are, dear," the tall woman said, her hand outstretched as though in welcome. "My, you do look pretty in your blue coat and your blue hat. My Joe used to say to me, there's a fine time coming, if you live to see it," and looking at Sheila she suddenly began to laugh.

They went on down the street.

"Come and see me one day, dear."

"Yes," Sheila said, and her mind was racing, and she was saying, "Yes and yes and yes and yes."

"Good-bye now," the tall woman said.

"Good-bye," Sheila said.

She watched her until she turned the corner, then she hurried away home.

CHAPTER XI

AND there was. Yes, sir, a fine time came for her. Heard about it in, well, where'd you think, yes, where d'you suppose? Rio of all places. Got a longish letter, oh how I read that letter. A son for us both, both of us. Kept reading it, then reading it again. "What name shall he be?" she asked, said, "I'd like him as Michael," and God, I felt so big about this wim-

thing I could have cried aloud, oh, I could have sung it, that she could call him the king of heaven if she liked, that pleased I was. I'd that letter under my pillow the whole trip, never tired of looking at it. Now I got well and clearly what she had bad that morning. I got an ache deep down, wanted this ship to fly, fly all the way home, but she wouldn't, took her all her time to drag ten and a quarter out of her vitals, sort of mean-spirited ship she was, and my bad luck. Sailed away from Rio, up to Santos, back to Rio again, then on to New York, oh, a whole host of places that ship travelled, and somehow I couldn't fasten on to her, couldn't get that hold, sort of touch a sailor has and gets to a ship. No, sir, this ship seemed different. I was still below, somehow I didn't care whether I was on top or below, I was easy in either now, took what was coming, did it, that's all there is to any kind of job. At last we got our orders. We sailed away from Maine, we headed for home.

I'd written a letter, written two, oh more than that, forgot how many and couldn't count them, save that the quartermaster aboard this tub who used to post them for me, often cursed my bad writing, saying he wondered how any girl could ever get to know *where* I was in a long and broad world. Ten and a quarter knots over a Western ocean.

No ocean like it, a smear on this ocean, kind of lurk to it, give me that bright Pacific, that hot Indian one, any times over. What stuff we burned in her fires, real coal would kill her. That kind of ship, and again, after a hell's tussle in her bunkers I was wondering why I'd signed in her at all. Every time you came up from below you'd wonder what kind of sky was about, but what colour that ocean had you never bothered to look. No colour to it at all, but all of a hugeness in the waves she made.

Even the crack of a whip in that spindrift come flying in over her bow, this ship had no head at all, no pride in her, this cockleshell *Trinity*. Her decks never level and never would be, always a shake in her, kind of tremble as if she were never sure of herself, even a creak out of her engines, as if she were

tired, so you thought, "All right, sir, first time this man's boat reaches twelve knots, or a margin over that, then it'll be on her trip to the breaker's yard."

That sort of feeling you had walking over her rickety body, some black dump owned her soul. You knew if she was tired, got a sort of palsy from this Western ocean, and no sailor will say this ocean bears a smile like that bright stretch of water heading out of 'Frisco Bay.

Out of a host of strangers on her, met up with a man named Elson. Looking at him you think by some miracle trick unknown to sailors, that this ship had got men right suited to her bulk, and to her dumpiness, and to her palsy, and to her tiredness, for no man looked so tired to me as this man named Elson.

Short as a dwarf is, a lick of a man, really, but he could work. Often I watched him lay-to there with the energy of ten giants. You watched and you thought, you figured it all out. This *Trinity* shaped him, yes, sir, this ship shaped this man. Never smiled, never heard him laugh once, like he'd her palsy with him. But he could work, he could do his job, that's all that counts on a sea and ocean, and in a place no sailor ever sees, where all authority on ship and sea holds its own. Then I got to liking this man, told me a tale, and another one, I knew him then, liked him more. A sailor born, belonged to a sea like me. He talked of his family, "a hell's brew," he said, and I talked of Sheila, and my son, newly come to us.

"God's own truth," I said to myself, "this man is sad." Often I thought about him as I lay in my bunk, couldn't get him quite out of my head, even worked Sheila out of her rightful place, I was suddenly full of this man named Elson. A *Trinity* fireman, and I trimmed to him. Sometimes we'd talk of ships, places he'd sailed to.

But not a flush to his face, not a tremble, like he'd no real feeling to him at all, just this sadness, cold as stone is.

"Cheer up, man," I'd say, "the world hasn't come to an end yet."

Not a laugh out of him, you'd wonder why.

Here I am stood by the rail on her weather side, take a wind in your face. O sailor, spit contempt on this ocean, spit that black stuff out of your mouth, that stuff this ship likes so much, this damn black dirt, don't call it coal. And then I turned my back on the ocean, I leaned my back to her rail. My chest bare, and that wind was good. Not a thought in my head this minute, not a thought until some men came past me. Just leaned there, seeing and sawing with this ship.

Pitch and roll and I'm with her, yaw about if she likes, and I'll yaw with her. This dumpy ship, all puff and blow out of her, keeping stern to ten and a quarter, she seemed determined on that. Then these men came by, one after another, no two gaits the same.

O sailor, I cried, be still and watch, watch these men pass. All shapes and sizes of men, to this job and that job and the other job they go, saying nothing, just going to it as sailors will. Here's a boy coming by now, like I was first time I sailed to a sea, fair-haired he is, and that look on his face, you know he's fair choked with hope like all young boys who have a taste for a sea. How swiftly my mind flies back to that man Elson, gone for'ard now, no doubt snug in his bunk by this time, where I should be, see his face again, what a raised map it is, this face that Elson has. Here's another coming by, how easy and sure the walk of this one. I watch him stride aft. Then I turned away and went for'ard. There! I hear it. One of the bell already, I think, a quarter hour lost while looking at this miserable ocean. Get for'ard and turn in, sailor, and hope for the best. Straightaway I went to the foc'sle, I found all were turned in. Some snoring hard.

Had my bit of grub, had a wash and brush down, then I undressed and turned in, too. I lay there and I thought of Sheila.

Yes, sir. This was the place to think of her, quiet in your bunk. Never mind that wind blowing in through a door, nor a rat's scuffle under that bottom bunk on her starboard side,

nor crawl of that bug or bugs around and about your bulk-head, nor that sing-song that came from her chain-locker, nor any snoring. Oh, how I thought of her, even see her face looking out at me through a film of smoke made by men who smoked black shag. Only once she went away, and I lost sight of her, that moment this ship took a sea full on top of her, thunder on her foc'sle head, heard it thud against her plates.

"Any day they'll go," I think. "Yes, any day those old plates will go."

I think, too, "Well, once I get ashore from her I'll be happy. Look for another ship, yes, sir."

A sailor may be in a ship, hard fast to her, but always he's looking for another one, and thinking of another one, any other but that one he's sailing in. You'd think this was a deal with the sea, a deal between her and all boats sailing. Always a sailor says, "She's good, but I'm looking for another one."

Who knows how far you'll go, how far his feet will take him, before he ends up in a man's ship, and says, "Well, here's the one, the very one, yes, here she is."

Walk and walk, sailor, and roam and roam, a kind of grit sea puts on a man, and on his hopes. Find a good ship and hold her, ah, but you have to find her first. *Starbound* was good, so were her men, how long did I stay? *Polaris* and *Scylla*, *Trumpeter* and *Black Prince*, how long did I stay? No time, and here I am, out of a long grey ship, far down now, and into a short black one, all frown and dumpy with it. That's how it is, will be, always will be, sailor, I tell myself. O damn your ships, let me think of her.

Let me think of my own, Sheila her name is. Here she is again, every single line of her, all her softness and smile, oh, golden smile. How fine, how pretty she looks, looming up now out of this smoky fog, how fine she looks.

"Hello, Sheila," I'd say. "Hello, darling," I'd whisper, and how she'd smile back, and more than that, that lad smiled, Mike, or the king of heaven, call him what you like, that lad was smiling back at me. Wouldn't I be the man to hear that

slow tear and grind of this black ship, just that moment I saw him, in my mind's eye, and thinking of what name I should give him, Joseph or Patrick, or Stephen or Billie, or Jack or George, this fine boy of mine. Wouldn't I hear the grind of that ten and a quarter, ten and a quarter slow knots in this Western Ocean, so big and sulky, sort of ocean in which you're racing with a horizon line, but that line goes faster, like there was no end to this ocean at all.

"O you black swine," I'd cry in my mind, "move, move," and just because Sheila and that new-born kid come clear to me, lying on my back in an iron bunk.

"Hello, hello," I'd cry to myself. "Oh, hello, you two." And was I proud then, O was I proud?

How that ship pitches into an ocean, and I'm not even listening, how those men snored and I couldn't hear a sound. I'm tight inside a circle made out of what I'm thinking. Ah, that's a fine thing about a sea, sailing your ship home. Already I have the touch of her hand, see her wait at the bottom of that gangway, that fine kid yell, O call him king of heaven then, I'll hold him soon, and hold her, too.

Here I am back in our house by the dock, a whole house smiling, I say here I am, and then I hear it. Seven rings of the bell, oh blast those bells. Show a leg there, sailor, show a leg. Up you get, sailor, and I got out of my bunk, others were tumbling out, too. I sat on a form pulling on my pants, fastening my boots, this man by the name of Elson was sitting beside me.

"Have a good sleep?" he says.

"Never slept a wink," I said.

"Then more fool you," he said, sort of joking, a way he had with him, but the wrong kind of joke, no laughter ever came with it, and curious enough it made me think.

"Why more fool me?" I said to him, and sharp.

"Ah! find out," he said, and then, more gruff than enough, "There's one of the bell. It's time we were out."

I looked at the other men, my mind could never get the right hang of this man Elson.

Just on the stroke of eight bells we went out on deck, my, she was tossing just like one gone mad, stark and tearing mad. We slithered and staggered to the alleyway, got the sweep of that hot air coming up from below, we passed inside, we began to climb down. What a forest she looked seen from on high, forest of wheels and things, and the great glint to her brass. Down we went, and down again, hear the voices of the others coming up. Heard one say, "She's cranky, it's that goddam stuff they gave us to burn in her."

A laugh and a joke, and no more said. Away we went down. That watch was hot, hotter than ever I'd known, and then I was told they were trying to increase her speed, only made me laugh out, "This crawling thing takes a long time to get to her own funeral."

Then I was busy trimming to Elson. I often wondered what had become of Scruff, that hot-headed man, and that rake of a man, finer than fine. I wondered where Scruff was, and how he was doing, if they were lost, well lost, like sailors sometimes are, and again I thought, "How about that scruff of a man, eh, how about him?" He would not be lost, but the rake might. No, Scruff would *never* be lost. He'd be safe from a sea, he'd be in another boat. He would not have gone down in any grey ship, because he would never go down, always defeat a sea.

Now there are some men with a sign upon them, and it spells everything except defeat by a sea. And always their heads will be above water, be it green or black, or blue, or just grey. This sign upon them stays, some say it's like the mark of heaven, but big ship or little ship, good ship or bad ship, lucky or unlucky, they stand erect in all manner of oceans. And while that sign stays to them, no sea can pull them down. Thinking on this made me think of that man Scruff once again. Just then some men started talking, five of the watch. I listened to them, the things they said.

" You'll never get twelve out of her," I heard one say. And another said, " You'll only break her," then yet another said, " Then *break* her, damn her, break her, save some monster wave a job, and that's what'll end her," and the way he said it you knew he meant it, aye, maybe even wanted it to happen to this dumpy ship.

" Or maybe one of them iron fish biting her."

Oh here they were at it again, this talk about fish.

" Goddam," I said, not being able to stand all this mouthing about tin fish, every watch I'd heard it, " have you ever been bitten by an iron fish? "

" Three times," one said, " each time I came up smiling," but he didn't smile now, I wondered why.

" No! I haven't," another said, and then Elson said, " God no, what comes out of its snout never hit any ship that I was in, and thank the Lord for that."

Look hard at him and you knew he meant it.

He squatted down on his heels, taking a break, and you wouldn't blame him, bright with sweat, all that top and front of him, glistening away in the half-light of this stokehold. I was trimming for him, and as he was taking a short blow, it meant I could take one with him, so I squatted down on my heels, too, and then we got to talking.

I'd call him dumb any time, and any time sad, but this hour I couldn't call Elson dumb. Talking away at me as I squatted there, you could almost feel the struggle those words had as they came out of his mouth, tearing out of him, almost against his own will. I wiped sweat away from me, took a good gobble from that oatmeal water, and it was fine.

" Ah," I said, " you're sad, and anybody can see it. Maybe something has got a hold on you. I was like that one time, too, always had a cold feeling over me, feeling of being right on my own, on my cold own in a great world. Couldn't get it out of my system at all. Then I met up with a woman, what a smile she had, talked about unfreezing me, warming me up. I held out on her, this coldness got worse, the ice touch, at last

I went away with her, I got unfrozen.

"This time you're home again," I said, "you get some smiling woman to unfreeze you, and take out that coldness."

For the first time in this trip I saw that man smile.

"Why not?" I said, but it wouldn't stay, and I aimed to keep that smile going in him, but no, sir, it wouldn't, and no words I said could hold it either. It was soon gone and he said no more.

We got to our feet and started in again. In between each barrow-load I'd have something to say to him. I told him how I'd got married.

"And this man's ship can't drive fast enough for me," I said, thinking all the time of a girl coming down that big shed. He said nothing.

"What's more," I said, "we've a little boy, aye, I'll show you a letter I got, we talk of calling him Mike, but we're not too sure yet. I tell you," I said, "nothing will hold me back once we touch a quay." And still he said nothing.

Plied that fire, took a rake and cleaned her, took a slice and got a draught to her, but he said nothing, never a word. We worked on in silence, I'd hear the others talking, always something to say, a laugh, a joke, talk about a fine time coming at trip's end, and where they'll meet for a big thirsty man's drink, but from this man Elson nothing, less than nothing.

What was he holding or saving up in that frame of his, what is it, I was asking myself, and always it was the same answer I got to my questioning, it would be the weight of worry about that hell's brew of a family of his. Then I said to myself, "Damn and hang that for a tale, or any excuse, it's something else," thinking of those others, all of them familied, and yet they could laugh and joke, even sing in that stokehold. Never could understand Elson, and never did. A secret he holds, and holds hard to it, something happened in his life, why ask a man what that may be if he is dumb? Couldn't warm to this man, ever a stranger to me. Here we are aboard this ship, what counts but working, from watch to watch. He

could work, so that's all that counted. Never talked to him again, and nobody else did. Left him alone, left him hold to his secret. Coming up that ladder at the watch's end, he'd go away aft, right aft to her poop, you'd wonder why he did it, looking back over that ocean she'd travelled through, I say he'd be looking back with a long, hard and deep look, and always did.

And here he got the air, never mixed much with us, often leaned over the *Trinity's* rails, cursed her, drank that fresh air in. Test a man by how he works, and this man worked. What's queer in him is no man's business.

CHAPTER XII

Look at this one bent right down to his knees, and watch those arms. This one lying stretched back on a coal heap, his mouth gawping open, it might be a fish. Hear a bone crack in Elson's back, hear a low swear from a trimmer boy, Hughes his name is. And hear her pulse going, stronger now, yet even whilst you listened you knew right well how she hated it, this axtra turn of speed. They've got twelve out of her, and more than that. Twelve and a half knots, and from the words coming from her bridge, sort of exploding in the engine-room as they came out, you knew she wanted it, and all she could get, and had to have it, to save herself and her dumpiness, and her dingy ways with sailormen.

Here it's hot as hot, everything you touch hot, and the air you breathe hot. Get up on to her deck now, as she's rattling her insides out, go up and get drenched to the skin by what she can take over, this ship liked no man aboard her. Burn you dry, and drench you cold. I was sent to her engine-room with a message for the engineer on duty. Look at them, engineers and greasers, they're hot, too, and black as any of us below. Listen to the explosions out of that speaking-tube. That

"Hello" that was frantic, that "Are you there?" with the ache and grind in it, that cry, "That you, Johnson?" as though it wasn't, as though something on top couldn't trust something below, nor the name he had, that engineer on duty. On top things were lively, yet no more lively than what's normal in a sailor's day. Chased, they said. This black tub being chased, this ship that is forever decrying her name. Who christened her *Trinity* must have thought she'd wings, would soar away and drive fast through seas, as a bird will drive through the air.

"That you, Johnson?" I heard again.

"Yes, speaking."

"Can't you give us an extra knot down there?" I heard.

Look at Johnson's face, you know what it says before he says it. "Can't do it," he cries back up her tube. "Can't . . . can . . . 't."

Look at the sweat and blackness there, look at her pistons gone raging mad, and no, he can't, and *she* can't, and no man can give what they cry out for on top.

"Hello, hello, hello," I heard Johnson call up then.

Wonder what's going on up there, fell to wondering on that. Then I'm bound to hard thoughts. What am I doing here, so far below a ship, when I should be hauling on a rope with others, or high up in her nest, even to sighting that wicked eye before it might ever sight *Trinity*.

"We must have it, and we've got to have it," came down her tube.

Johnson says nothing, taking his breath there, he looks across at that greaser, oiling for his dear life, even looked over at me. That look says to all, "That extra knot just has to be got."

He meant it, you knew it, another knot, and one more knot for men to tie themselves into in this stokehold.

"Draw up that ash."

"Fill her up, fill her up."

"More coal, more coal."

The cries in my ears. I fell flat across my barrow.

"Take him up, get him into the air, and quick about it."

Somehow, some way, I'm climbing, and then I'm up. I flopped like a herring fresh drawn from the sea.

"Come down again when you feel O.K.," a man said, couldn't see who he was.

Oh, sailor, look at that ocean, that great tearing sea, with her black look, her bleak look, her starved look, this one cries out for a ship, yes this sea cries out. Watch those waves climb, how dizzily high, and higher than that soon, if that mood's still on her. That blackness to her surface, it's almost a shine. And I looked hard at it, and you felt that at any moment she might cry out, "O give me a ship."

I got the air into my lungs, I stood up, I held on to a stanchion nearby. Felt a weakness still, so I leaned hard to it, I kept breathing in fast, and I went on watching and watching that ocean.

Sailor, she goes, she goes, this ship goes home. Look at her shipping seas, what kind of fish could trail her in this?

After a while I went down below again. Elson came up to me then. He spoke. "D'you feel any better now," he said, and I didn't answer, as though my mouth were covered completely by the surprise I felt at this man speaking, whose real name should be Dumb.

"I'm all right," I said. "I'm O.K. now," I said, after I got over my surprise.

So we buckled to, we got her to thirteen, I thought she'd split or burst, crack to pieces under us. But she didn't. Something stubborn in her, hid away behind her dumpiness, she went on going, and kept to it. Before I realised it that watch had ended.

What number and manner of men went about their business saying nothing, like one and all they'd come to a silence, by some arrangement, secret, deep down. A time to be silent, sailor, and a time for speaking. Look at them all, skipper and

mate and bosun and greaser, engineer and storekeeper and Chips and Lamps, and mere sailormen. Going to and fro, going up and down, and no words out of them. Look at one and you have looked at them all, measured what's behind it. Still around us this fish crept, there are iron fish rightly made for rough seas, we all know this. But none thought of that steel eye watching, that fish-eye, that fright. I swear they didn't. I swear heart spoke to heart, in and out of that silence, and heart said to heart, "This ship goes home."

Forward and backward then, that tongue still in your head, forward and backward with a sureness and a quietness and a resolve. Get this ship home. Nothing to shout about, nothing to wonder at, when you touch quay you might cry aloud, "Now sink her and damn her and Western ocean have her, I'm moving again."

Yes, I had that feeling strong now. "I'll clear from her soon's she's in." I'll get out of her. There are fine ships and finer, than this black *Trinity*. There's a hundred ships and a thousand ships, so take your choice, sailor, now take your choice.

Ah! How can I think of fish or sea, or ships and men? How can I, when all the time, and blisteringly real in front of me, wherever I look, I can see her waiting, who matters more than oceans, a thousand ships sailing them. My mind would cry out, "Hello, Sheila, I'm coming, coming fast on the crest of a time," and what a time it is, never describe it, never fathom it, only sailormen can. That time of sailing home. Get channel fever like a first tripper, get palsy like this ship, but you're sailing home. Let her fly then, fly fast. These thoughts were trailing me, wherever I went, in bunk or at work. Faster and faster then, go faster and faster. When she touches quay I'll be first man ashore. What did you marry for, what do you live for, if not for this.

Grub time came in that foc'sle, and they were crying at me. Got a channel fever, sailor, you got it bad. They chaffed, and I didn't give a damn, had it, and wanted it, this ship was sailing, sailing fast for home.

"More than your braces to take home to the missus," one said.
"He can't sleep at all for thinking about her," another said.
What they said about me, but stood for them all.

Finished my grub, had a wash and brush down, turned into my bunk. Lie there, sailor, time's your own, think of one thing, fast flying to her. There she's waiting, every minute she's waiting, the king of heaven will be with her. The throb, throb that shook the *Trinity*, coming right up to her deck, came my way, what a throb of engine, fighting it out with all that sound in a chain-locker, and those roars overhead as now and again she took the weight of a sea on that dumpy nose she had. But she kept to it, she even got thirteen and a quarter knots, and held it, too. For once I stopped thinking of her dumpiness, she made such a great effort. Watch the hours go, watch those days spin by. One morning and before it was light we got a landfall, and what a landfall it was. Watching these men I could tell how they were feeling, but you can't describe it, it's like a language but there's no key to it. Every look on their faces, every movement they made, brought it home to you. These men were treading air, and hearing music somewhere, a long way off maybe, but hearing it all the same, and thinking of known landmarks, colours, and all shining things, many a woman, and those girls that can unfreeze you. Believe it or not, we woke up one morning, and there it was, never a doubt about it, the *Trinity* was nosing towards a dock, that ship was home.

And she was waiting there, just as I knew she would be, There was something tucked into her arms. "That's Mike, I'll bet," I said, and everything inside me was laughing then. "Yes, that's him all right."

From this ship's rail I was waving away to her, and she waved back. Lord! The jokes that were flying about my head then.

"That the missus, my, she's pretty, isn't she?"

"Aye! That's her all right," I said, and was I proud?

An old man came by me, wizened like a monkey, a greaser in my watch, he tapped me on the shoulder. I looked at him

and at his egg-shaped head and his bright eye. "Hello, there."

"Lucky man," he said, his hand on mine, it had a hard, leathery feel about it.

Down the shed I could hear many feet tramping and I knew these were the dockers coming to haul the stuff out of her holds, then I heard excited voices. Other people were coming down to meet their men. Then the gangway came down. What's a gangway, sailor, on this bright morning, sort of chariot, and down it came.

I rushed back to the foc'sle and lashed my bag. Everybody was packing up, and when they'd all rushed out there was a silence in that horseshoe-shaped foc'sle for the first time in the whole trip.

In ten minutes I was down that gangway, the shed was full of sailors and their women and everybody laughing and chatting. Here's the bright world, sailor, and it's all yours. And it was.

CHAPTER XIII

SING a song, sailor, cried sea, O sing me a song.

Of all this vastness, vast as vast, and never no end, yet stretching, oh how far stretching, deluge of space in desert of air. And higher than mountains, walls, and wall on wall, can't see or feel, and yet they're here, compressing space. Bone's cleanness and stone's coldness, oh, Christ, how it stretches, what deadlier blow than its towering walls, one meet another, then row on row assembled as one triumphant, and there to defy, and more than men, the heave and ho of a great tearing sea. Listen as mind spins and reels from pressure of air and ocean of space. Huddled to the bare inch, laid low and sure, and one with this rocking and tissing and tossing, flesh fast as a vice, flesh fast to a raft.

Raft rose up, then down, and the sea heaved and went on heaving. Sing a song sailor, sing a song.

Slobber came up and blood with it, and any number of words were free.

"How you dream, sailor, oh how you dream," one said.

"Go and wipe his mouth."

"I'll wipe his mouth."

"Then when you've done that, lie on him."

"I'll relieve the other feller who's lying on him."

"It'll help to keep him warm. How he raves and dreams."

"How he raves and dreams, and his name's Johnny, and by all he says, he's got a missus named Sheila."

"And talks of an old war, too."

"Twenty-five years ago it was."

"All right, you go and take your turn on him."

And this man went along and relieved his mate. He lay on the sailor lashed and bound. He lay hard on him. "Helps to keep the cold out of your bone," he said, but the bound one heard nothing, he drowned in dream, and cried to be covered.

The one who was relieved went back to his place on the raft.

"How is he?"

"The same. Just raving."

"You better try to sleep. Lying flat on a man to keep the wind from him can make you feel all out after a time."

"Yes."

He then lay down.

By turns they laid on him, it kept the high wind out.

More slobber came up and more blood with it, but the one who was lying on him said nothing, because there was nothing to say. He lay very close, and a hard, brown arm was right under his eye, and the hairs on it waving when he breathed, and he saw a great tattooed lady looking up at him, but he said nothing, and he didn't smile. Just lay there and was quiet.

Let this sailor dream, let all the words come free, and all those ships he was dreaming about, let them come clear of their anchorage, nose their way to a sea, in all weathers, and in all seasons. Watch them, sailor, watch them swing clear of cables, here they are coming by, cry their names out. cry them out

dreamer, like they were glories or burdens, let them come by.

Starbound and *Scylla* and *Jasmine*; *Cornelius* and *Dove* and *Mentor*, call their names as they go, like weights to be rid of, riding fine or clumsy, all their horns blowing, hear their heave and ho. Well gone and all gone, and just as you are, sailor, all gone and well gone.

"How you dream, sailor," he said, and suddenly he smoothed back the matted hair from his forehead. "But all the same you're twenty-five years behind the times, man, this war is a new war, and that's the one you're in now."

Saying this he fell asleep on him.

The other two were leaning against each other, back to back, and they were mumbling to each other.

"I always thought he was about forty, but he looks double that now."

"I never sailed in a sea he sails in now."

"Nor I either."

"I wonder where we go from here?"

"Where sailors go."

"He's off again. Listen!"

They were listening.

"They ramble like that."

"I know they do."

"Listen again. Hear what he shouted then?"

Silence.

"I said did you hear what he shouted out then?"

"Not listening. Just hanging on to what's left to hang on to, understand?"

Silence.

"Do you *understand?*"

Silence.

"*Do you understand?*" shouting.

"All right then, take what's coming to you and shut up."

"I am shut up."

"Then stay shut up."

The sea heaved and went on heaving.

CHAPTER XIV

Soon as I got in that shed there she was. I flung down my bag and threw off my cap. "Hello, hello, hello."

Aye! There she was, and that kid, too.

"Hold me, Johnny."

"I am."

"Hard," she said in a little whisper, all those men and their girls going on past us, but none of them minded us much, too busy minding themselves.

"Oh! I'm glad you're home," she said, "Glad, glad."

How the two words leaped up at me, I knew she was glad all right.

"That's fine then," I said, and I took one look at that kid. He'd a lick of hair sticking out from under his white bonnet, like a little yellow flame it was as it blew in the wind, and he was half over her shoulder, leaping about there like a lively trout, any minute you'd think he'd dive to earth. We went away up the shed, turned out of the dock gate, then another turn right and we were off home at last.

Heave up, sailor, take it all, every little bit, here's something finer than any ship or sea. That's how I felt going along that road, and I started to carry that son of mine.

"Not named yet then?" I said.

"Yes, Johnny, his name is Michael."

"Not so fast," I said, "not so fast, take it easy, plenty of time to-day, no need to worry about a clock."

We passed by many a shipmate hard bound for home, and not a few heading the wrong way, dockwards, away to sea that day. Tough on you, shipmate, tough on you, I thought, watching them go by. Then I forgot ships and men and oceans. I kept looking at Sheila and she wasn't noticing it. I thought how pretty she looked walking along.

"Oh, I am glad you're back, Johnny, honest I am," she said.

I laughed at that. We turned into the street where we lived, and there was the house, just like I'd left it five minutes ago, everything the same. I put the son down on the sofa and then we were hugging each other again, and I was feeling fine about... everything.

Suddenly she broke away, and I let her go. There was work to be done. She took the kid away upstairs and when she came down again she began to get the table ready. I wasn't half looking forward to that meal, either.

"That was an awful-looking man you left your bag with," she said.

"Who? Old Walrus? Oh, he's all right. Best man around town for carrying a man's bag. A stranger to you, but you'll get to know him like everybody else around here."

We were sitting opposite each other.

"Well, girl, how'd you get along while I was away?"

"Oh, all right," she said, but you couldn't be quite sure she meant it, just the same.

"You sure everything's O.K.?" I said.

"Sure," she said.

"Meet up with anybody nice and friendly, that's the main thing."

She told me she met up with a queer old woman, and that the woman next door had been a great help with the youngster. Her name was Keown.

"Oh, aye," I said, "so you're all right now, I mean you're getting used to the place."

A nod of the head and no more.

"You drew my money all right each week?" I said.

Another nod of the head. I wondered why she suddenly closed down on talk.

"There's somebody at the door, Johnny."

"Righto!"

Soon as I opened the door there was the faithful Walrus standing there and my bag at his feet.

"Hello there, Walrus, how's the world using you these

days?" I said, looking down at this muffled and belted and well-coated old sailor, now in the transport business, Baggage Express he called himself, and he'd been christened Walrus a while back on account of his whiskers.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said, shuffling his feet a bit, there was just a bite of frost in the air, and he started clapping his hands. He wore blue mittens.

"Your whiskers are still as black as coal, Walrus," I said. "Ought to be grey by this time."

"My missus keeps on saying the same thing," he said.

"Your meal's going cold, Johnny," I heard her call back there.

"Coming now," I shouted back.

"Well, here's your bag, Manion, and the charge's gone up, by the way, war costs and all that sort of thing. Half a dollar to you, Mr. Manion."

"Aye, aye."

I gave him half-a-crown and told him to go away and celebrate. Considering the number of bags he'd have carried home that morning, and the treats he'd had, I reckoned he'd be fair rocking before the day was over.

"Any amount of fine ships going in this war," he said, as he was turning away.

"That's so. And any amount of fine men, too."

"Johnny! Do shut the door. The child will catch cold. Come along now."

"I'm coming.

"Well, Walrus, knock one back for me at 'The Robin,' will you."

"Hi, hi," he said, tugging at his whisker, and away he went. I shut the door and then went back and finished my grub. After that I helped her to clear everything away.

"Johnny, it's lovely seeing you home again," she said, and that smile, why you could light a cigar from it.

"You bet," I said. "This evening we'll go out and celebrate, how about it. Celebrate the kid, shall we? I'll go and

see this Mrs. Keown of yours, maybe she'd keep an eye on the youngster while we're out."

"Yes, let's go somewhere, Johnny, all by ourselves," she said.

We were sitting opposite each other against the fire. I kept darting my eye round the place and I couldn't help noticing how everything was shining. It pleased me a lot. Looked like I'd got hold of a rare good wife. She was crying there, almost before you could say knife. I sat on the arm of her chair.

"Cheer up, girl, fancy crying when your man's home."

She kind of half whispered that she couldn't help it, she was so happy.

Now many a shipmate lived hard by, and different ships sailed in, and as a man will, first thing I did was to ask how everybody was. She told me then, she kept looking away from me as she talked about them.

"That fellow Ned Halloran, greasing aboard the *Magician*," I said.

"He came home last night."

"And that young fellow, Stevens his name is, I think before the mast on the *Drone*."

"Gone!"

"Ah," I said, "ah! There was a rather oldish sort of man name of Belton, firing in that *Egyptian*, they say she's a terrible ship below, how's he? He'd a fairish sized family. You know the man I mean. Lives top of the next street. I often wondered where that *Egyptian* ship got to."

"So does his wife," she said, so I said nothing for a bit, understood her meaning.

"And little Tommy Jackson. Lord! makes me laugh every time I think of him, a proper corkscrew of a man he was, but a fine sailor, served his time in the *Meridian*. Middle-aged chap, and courting that Nellie Dove, you know, that man Scruff's only daughter."

"He's gone."

"Joe Donaghue and his brother Billie, twins weren't they, all Blue Star men."

"Gone!"

"Mind Taffy Hughes, came from a place you can't pronounce the name of, trimming on the *Ephesian*."

"Gone!"

"Dick Furst."

"Gone!"

"Let's go out, Sheila," I said. I got up at once. "Let's go somewhere, come on, let's get out for a breath of air."

And that was what I wanted after hearing what was going on while I was away, and straight upstairs I went and changed. She came up a few seconds later. I took hold of her. "I'm a fool of a man," I said, "going asking you all those questions. Come on, now, let's forget everything, here I am home, just think about that. Now get dressed and make me feel proud of you when we go down that street. I'm going to see this Mrs. Keown about keeping an eye on the youngster." With that I left her changing her dress.

I found Mrs. Keown busy ironing clothes in her kitchen. I think she knew me.

"Good evening. Would you be Mr. Manion?"

"That's me," I said. "It's very good of you to offer to keep an eye on the youngster whilst I take the missus out this evening."

"Not at all. Off you go and give her a good time, too. She's been through it with that child."

"Thank you," I said, "thank you."

"When are you sailing again, Mr. Manion?"

"That I can't say, but I'm glad to be home."

"Who isn't, once in a while. I'll slip in to see you before you go."

I thanked her again, she seemed a decent enough neighbour to me. When I got in I called out, "Hello there, Sheila. I've seen it. Now we can go out, where'd you like to go. How about a show somewhere?"

No answer. "Hello there, girl, where are you?"

"I'm upstairs," she shouted back.

She was sitting on the bed when I found her, hadn't even bothered to dress.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want to go anywhere, Johnny. I just want to stay at home and be with you."

"All right," I said, "but I did want to take you out somewhere. Think it over and then if you still don't want to go, then it's off."

I was a bit disappointed myself. I went downstairs and made up the fire. She came down after me. "No, perhaps to-morrow," she said. "Yes, to-morrow." I stood watching her as she sat in the chair.

"I'll slip out and bring you in something," I said, and went out at once.

"Come on now, girl, cheer up," I said, and I gave her a tot of hot rum. "Cheer up now, the world hasn't come to an end yet."

We drank the health of that kid, she managed to give me a smile, but deep down something seemed wrong. We talked and talked.

"I'm so happy you're home," she said, and kept on saying it. She went off to put the youngster to bed for the night. I lit the gas.

"Sheila," I said, soon as she came down again, "you are happy, I mean, well . . . you know what I mean," and I was stuttering away there and she was laughing into my face.

"I'm glad you're home," she said for the hundredth time, and then suddenly clutching at me, "I'll hate you going, Johnny. I'll hate that," and it was a fierce whisper in my ear.

"Let's go to bed," I said, "we've talked enough." That night I dreamed I was a king.

CHAPTER XV

I'd set that alarm clock to ring me awake at eight prompt and it did. There she was lying beside me, and a bit of sun coming in through the window, but it soon went off again. See the sea from that window and at any time a host of ships.

I sat up. "I'm happy this morning," I said. I couldn't hold it back. Then she was nestling up to me and I was swimming in a rare kind of warmth, hanged if I wanted to get up at all.

"Johnny!"

"What, darling?"

"I'm so glad you're home with me and with the baby, too."

She held me hard, and that was the overflow of what had been piling up in her sleep and dream.

"I watch you go out," she said, "and I say, but he'll be back, because he's hard bound. And if you go upstairs it's the same, you'll be coming down again, you're here, home with me. And I'm happy, oh I am, Johnny."

I was a king, rich as one, proud as one.

Be careful, sailor, all that warmth can hold like a vice.

"I'm getting up now."

"Already?"

"Already," I said, "I've business to-day, paying off in that damned ship I was in. And I must be out before nine o'clock," I said, beginning to dress.

She lay back and said nothing. I finished dressing and went below. In twenty minutes I was up again, giving her a cup of tea.

"Here's you tea," I said.

She looked up then. There was something vague and dreamy and faraway in her look, and seeing it I hated to put a cold touch on all her dreaming.

"I noticed something yesterday," she said.

"What?"

Smiling, she said, "You're going grey here, and *here*, Johnny."

"What an odd thing to notice," I said.

"I suppose you'll be paying off *and* signing to-day," she said.

"It may work out just like that, girl."

"Oh, Johnny, I'll hate you're going, Oh! . . ."

And with that "Oh!" there came such a look on her face, that same look I saw last time I swung my bag to my shoulder and went off to sea. And that "Oh!" went on ringing in my ears like a bell. God! I felt sad then.

What is it they know and we don't, and feel and sense? What is it? To know something and get the weight of it before you do. Get it when you can't. And how can you, anyhow, when all you can think of is flying colours and a good time whilst home, and a drink here and there with a shipmate. I know now, but I didn't then. Something deeper than bone, thicker than a man's blood, older than any man is. Her "Oh!" opened a door on to a place I never once thought of, hardly seen, no time to think about. Like a door opened and it's dark outside. Something was coming along, true as true, and it did come, but only she saw it, and all her kind saw it. I held her in my arms. Say your piece, sailor, say your piece.

"Sure how can I sail home, girl, if I don't sail away. Now I must go. She's signing at half-past ten prompt, and I must get my pay, mustn't I. Cheer up now, I won't be long," and I rushed off downstairs, put on my coat and cap and went out. I went off down the street like a man with five minutes to live. That clock was slow, it was much later than I thought. In no time I was in that shed, and there she was, hard by the quay. What a forest of cranes and derricks sticking up all over the place. A quick turn-round here, I thought. What's all the hurry? Away I went aboard. All kinds of hellos and any amount of shouts and enquiries about how you were feeling, and if you were signing back in her. I knew I wasn't, and many another sailorman wasn't either.

"Hello, Manion, you signing back in her?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"No! I'm not, and that's definite."

Another chap came up to me then.

"Say, Manion, that tich is after your job."

"O.K. He's welcome to it, and her miserable bo'suns, hang her twice over, and sink her. I'm looking for something better than her, and so's many another man if you ask me." I went off to the saloon, came up with a gang all talking at once.

"Signing back, Manion?"

"No."

"Have *you* signed in her?"

"Me! In that tub. No sir."

"Heard a rumour they're selling her."

"Selling her, *that* thing?"

"Aye."

"Who to?"

"The Devil."

"Who's he?"

"A Greek."

"Oh, now I understand," I said. "Put a bit of fresh paint on her, shine her brass here and there, and she'll sell as new to any Greek. I suppose her owner knows his business."

"Ah, sink her then. I'm away. So long, shipmates."

"So long, so long."

I watched those men go, and they were my shipmates in *Trinity*. I wondered where their steps would take them, what fortune they'd meet up with, and then I knew it didn't matter a tinker's damn, I'd forget them by to-morrow. That's how it is. A hail and farewell. More men were coming out now.

"They've sold her."

There he goes, Big Ears, he seems to get a hold on everything that's going on.

"Well, Doran, who told you they sold her?"

"Heard her second talking about it. Sold while we were sailing her home."

"There you are, shipmate, how the hell can a sailor call a

ship his own. Sold her while we were firing her below. There's an owner for you."

"An owner's an owner, and he knows his business best."

"I know mine, too," Doran said. "They're going to sign a skeleton crew to take her over to Salonika. That bosun Tulley must be crying his eyes out about it."

"They'll never find a skeleton crew amongst this crowd," I said.

And they didn't. Not a man Jack signed back in her to take her to the Devil. In a few minutes we were all clear of that shed. I got talking to a man name of Grimes, greaser in my watch on that ship. We went straight out of the dock.

"Just in time for 'The Hangman' opening," he said.

"That's fine."

"What'll you have?"

"Scotch, no water."

"One Scotch, one pint of Falstaff, Harry."

"Right you are, sirs," Harry said. He was wearing a brand new white apron, and his sleeves well rolled up. You knew there was much business ahead of him. And soon that pub was crowded. But you couldn't listen properly, you weren't really listening at all, such a chorus behind and in front of you, that place fair packed with men all paid off this very day. And the talk, the talk. Just listen to them talking, and that clink, clink of glasses all the time.

"Just home?"

"Aye! Just this very minute you might say."

"When you sailing again?"

There it was again. When were you sailing, shipmate? I remembered how my mother said the same thing.

"I dunno."

"Hello, *hello*, HELLO. How's things. I came in last night. Eight days in a goddam boat all by myself. What are you having?"

"You mean what are *you* having?"

"O.K. then. What's your ship this time?"

"Mine's well below, shipmate. Hit the rocks, lost all my gear, and some fine stuff for the missus went with it."

Listen to somebody up front.

"Ah, there's a fine time coming along for us, you can hear them crying it out of them wherever you go these days."

"Ha, ha!"

"Rubbish."

"Can't hear yourself talking for the gabble," Grimes said, then quick, "'Scuse me a minute, shipmate, won't be long," and he went out to the back.

Who the devil's tugging at my coat. Swung round and there was that man Dumb.

"Hello, Elson, have a drink?"

"O.K. by me. I'm sailing at nine o'clock," he said.

"To-night?"

"That's it," he said.

"Hell's fire, what's all this, man, why you only got home yesterday, and weren't you the man for crying that *Trinity* couldn't get home fast enough."

The drinks came. "Your health," he said, drained the glass at one swig.

"So long," he said, "I must be off."

I couldn't believe my eyes. And the hurry he was in. He gripped my hand. He could grip, Dumb could. "Well, so long, Elson, best of luck wherever you go," and then he was gone. Flashed out of that pub like a piece of lightning. There he was, completely gone out of my life. Never saw him again, and I never will. Queer chap, but that's no man's business. Just then Grimes came back.

"I want to talk," he said, shouted out, "Same again, Harry," then lowering his voice, "Let's get into that corner, I want to talk."

We picked up the drinks and crossed the bar. "Right you are, let it go."

We sat down. "First to-day," I said.

"Skin off your nose," he said. "Now listen! I've just heard

of a wonderful ship, just come down from the Tail of the Bank.
Marvellous ship, judging by what I hear."

"Oh yes."

"Aye! Eighteen thousand tonner, bit of a flyer, too, good grub, and a decent skipper."

"How decent? You don't mean respectable?"

"No, not like that, just decent."

"That's good. Fire ahead," I said.

"She's signing a crew this week."

"This week! When? What day?"

"To-morrow," he said.

I said nothing, I was doing a bit of quick thinking, and wasn't noticing that clock, either, ticking minutes away, every one of them counted by Sheila.

"Well?"

"I tell you, man, this ship has a reputation, and she keeps it up. She's signing to-morrow, she carries a crew of a hundred and ten, and they say he's a lucky man who gets the right sort of glance from her bosun on signing day."

"Go on."

"Now this one's foc'sle is good, they've a bogie in her, and not only that, but there's a proper place for a man to swill down. You don't have to take the bull by the horns and do two jobs at once in her lavatory like in that *Trinity*."

"Sounds all right," I said.

"But the firm's good, they say. How'd you feel, Manion?"

"How do I feel? You mean about this ship?"

"Yes, about this ship. I reckon we two might sign in her. I like you, Manion, and though you don't know much about me, you might like me, too. We got on well aboard the *Trinity*."

That was true enough.

"Hold your breath, man, here's something a man has to think about. You're different to me. Feet are freer, you can move where you wish, and if you feel down in the mouth, pick up a Jane, no responsibilities, sail away anywhere, any time,

any how. But I got to think. I've a missus, and a kid, too."

"All the more reason why you should sign, shipmate, money's money."

"I know money's money."

"And wars don't last for ever. This one'll finish some day, and so will the danger money. There's a quid a month gone, shipmate, and a quid's a quid."

"All right, all right. I know a quid's a quid," I said.

And I knew a pound a month danger money would go when the bells started to ring. And every sailor would think the same, for after all a pound a month's a pound a month, danger or no danger.

I said nothing for a bit, thinking hard again. This ship was interesting me, and I was thinking, how, if a ship signs, she sails two days later, at the most three. Had to think of how Sheila would take it.

"Here's the very ship a man might have been dreaming about," I said to myself, "the *very* ship, maybe. Should I take a chance, or what. That was it, this what business."

"Hold hard, Grimes, I got to think this out. Have another one."

"No! This one's on me," he said.

"O.K. You will have your way."

Grimes pulled out a pipe, cleaned, filled and lighted it, and I was still thinking.

"Well?"

"Oh, I don't know, I can't make up my mind," I said.

"Wish I could make it up for you," he said. "I've a feeling she might be a real good ship. Half my life's been sailing ships, and always I've hoped to meet up with a real spanker, and this might be her, shipmate."

"You seem confident about it, anyhow," I said.

"Why feel the other way? It won't help much. My line of thinking's maybe different from yours, all the same, she might be a lucky ship."

"Look here! Give me time to think this over, Grimes.

Suppose I meet you somewhere to-night, how about it, where'll we say?"

"How about 'The Cable?'"

"Fine! 'Cable' it is, then. What time about?"

"Around half-nine, earlier if you can. Got some business to do to-night."

"Right! That's settled then. 'The Cable' around half nine."

We put down our glasses and went out. We shook hands like we were lifetime pals.

"So long."

"So long now."

His way was due South and mine North.

CHAPTER XVI

EVERYTHING was fine when I got home, except that she wasn't dressed for going out, as I'd asked her to be. There she was as quiet as a mouse, sat in the chair at the fire.

"Hello," I said, shutting the door after me, but not a move, so I shouted it. "Hello there, girl," I shouted.

"I thought you were never coming," she said, looked up at me, and then I knew something wasn't quite right. I sat down and took her on my knee.

"What's wrong? What's the trouble?"

Smiling she said, "Nothing, there's nothing wrong, Johnny," and my heart rose up.

"I thought there was. You sitting there so quiet," I said.

"Where's Michael?"

"In bed. Where'd you suppose he'd be?" She said it a bit sharp, too. "Did you sign?" she said.

"No, I didn't," and I was just as sharp, got a bit of a kick out of saying it like that, and then I cursed myself, went off into long explanations, saying how hardly a man jack had signed

back in that *Trinity* ship. "A lousy ship." That made her laugh.

"But it *was*, girl," I said, being downright emphatic about it.

"Yes, I know," she said. "And I'm learning, too. It's always the next ship that will be the best one that ever was. Isn't that so, Johnny?"

I just nodded my head, thinking, "not a word about how long I was away this day, or where I've been, or how many drinks I've had," and then I knew she was beginning to settle down, beginning to understand a sailor's ways.

"How about something to eat?" I said, "and then we'll go out. Just me and you. That woman'll keep her eye on the kid for us. Anything you want to-night," I said, giving her a good hug, "and anything you like to see, anyting you care to name," and then I pulled out my money and put it in her hand.

"But if I didn't sign, I *did* at least get paid," I said, casual. "There's plenty more ships besides a tub called *Trinity*."

She held on to my hand. Somehow I thought she looked a bit sad this evening, and quick as quick I said so.

"I know what it is," I said, holding her close, "you're thinking of the eleven good men living in this very street who didn't come back. Yes, that's what it is, you're feeling a bit down in the mouth, girl. Don't. Cheer up, be happy, think of me being home, and with you." Her head was lying on my shoulder then. "Well?" I said.

"No," she said, "I wasn't thinking about that . . . well, I was . . . but I'm not thinking about it now, I mean . . . oh, well . . . ?"

"Well what?"

And I knew she'd break down any minute, and I knew why, too.

"What's worrying you?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Then let's get something to eat and go out. After all, when a man's home he must take his missus out. Say where you'd

like to go, darling, name anything you want this night and it's yours."

"I don't want to go out anywhere," she said. "I just want to stay here, and you to stay, too, and you've hardly seen Michael yet."

"Anything to please you," I said, "anything at all," and I took off my coat and settled down.

I forgot all about Grimes and that meeting in "The Cable."

She got up and went out. I could hear her going upstairs, and I knew she was going to see to that kid. I got up and went after her.

"Without the slightest doubt, sailor," I told myself, mounting the stairs, "without a doubt you're a bit of a harum-scarum man and just like your dad." I went into the room. She was sitting with Michael in her arms, and he was feeding away goodo. I moved the candle away so's the shadow wouldn't fall on him.

"My God! He's a fine boy, Sheila," I said.

She smiled but said nothing. I sat down and stayed sat till that kid had had enough, and all the time I had my eye on Sheila, and just looking at her made all kinds of feelings rise up in me, and you could almost feel the great weight of being away on a sea, and going away to sea, and leaving all that's fine and grand behind you. And the *grind* of going away, and *being* away, I could now feel all the whole lot of it, just looking at her sitting there, just finished feeding that kid. I caught hold of her in my arms and I didn't want ever to let go that hold.

"Johnny," she said, tickling my ear, "you said I could have anything I wanted, didn't you?"

"Of course, of course."

"God! In that minute I would have pulled down the moon for her."

"Then will you take us to the country to-morrow, just to see a bit of green, oh, anything that's green and away from all these walls."

"Good Lord! Yes, of course. First thing in the morning, girl," I said. "Many a time when I'm free and easy in a dog-watch," I said, lying in my bunk, I've wondered how you were getting along, settling to this place. It's so different to where you come from . A country's green, but a city's grey. Often wondered how you managed to get along, trying to forget this jungle of streets and roads and more streets and walls and walls."

"Mind you," I said, "there's this. You can open any window in this house and look out and there's the sea. And it's always there to look at. Maybe one morning just that green you like, and perhaps as still as still, another morning, brownish and heaving a little bit, and another time the whole sun shining away on it. Believe me, some people would be glad to see the sea outside their window. All right then. That's done it. We'll go off to the country first thing to-morrow morning."

She was all cheered up about this. We came downstairs again.

"You're right," I said, my hand on her shoulder, coming slowly down the stairs, "I am just a bit harum-scarum, but I mean well." And I meant it, too.

I made everything nice and comfortable for her, then slipped along to "The Pitchpine," and brought her back a tot of rum, it was a rare cold evening. We got talking then, talking away about her father and her grandfather, and heaven knows how many aunts she had, a surprise to me, talking away there, and then there was a sudden bold knock on the door.

"Now who could that be at this time of night?" she said. I never looked at her, I just stared at the confounded clock.

"Holy smoke! I know who it is," I said. "It's a shipmate. Should have kept an appointment with him at 'The Cable.' Now who could have told him where I lived, unless it was Harry, the barman, yes, that's who told him."

Soon's I opened that door I got it full in the face.

"You're the hell of a nice feller," Grimes said.

I couldn't see him in the dark, but it *was* him all right.

"And certainly no sailor with an eye to business," he said.

"My own father was just the same. Come in," I called out to him.

Sheila got up at once. I introduced them, and then the next minute she was away upstairs, something she had to do, and Grimes was sitting in her chair.

Quietly I closed the kitchen door and sat opposite him.

"I thought you were meeting me at nine o'clock," Grimes said.

Smiling I said, "And so did I."

"Now listen," he said. "Since I saw you I've been doing a bit of finding out, see?"

"Course, I see, but not so loudly, man, talk soft, can't you." He gave me such a look then.

"I've been aboard the damned ship this day."

"You have?"

"Yes, and she's sailing to-morrow evening, too."

"That's awful quick, isn't it?"

"I know it is, and quick's the chance, too," Grimes said.

I could hear Sheila moving about upstairs, I wondered what was keeping her.

"One day this goddam war'll be over," he said.

"I know that, I'm not a stupid man."

"Easy, easy, what's at you, Manion, trod on the cat's tail. Never said you were stupid, never said you weren't. What I said was that this state of affairs will come to an end, and things will be normal again."

"I know that, too."

"But there's a hell of a lot of shouting and singing and drinking going on just the same," Grimes said, "and many a sailor might one day find that things are less than normal."

"You're a Jonah, Grimes," I said, "a Jonah." This man is cute, sailor, this man sees well ahead. "Go on," I said.

"I'm a seafaring man, just like you are, and I say that when things are normal, they're bad, but what's it going to be like when they're not even normal?"

"You're not married?" I said.

"No!"

"Got any kind of Jane at all?"

"No! Though I've met up with one here and there like any sailor would, but nothing in the regular way," he said.

"Well, I'm married," I said, "and I'm glad I'm married, and I've got a fine son, too, and I'm glad about that as well. Here I am back after nine months and how d'you suppose I feel about it, and her feeling about it."

Grimes sat bolt upright, but I wasn't noticing much what he was saying now, still wondering why Sheila wouldn't come down.

"I can't say there, shipmate," he said, "no, I can't say there, but this I will say. A man may have a whole wild sea of feelings in him, and his missus the same, and that's all clear and understood because it's human, but all the time, all the time there's this money business hanging after you like your own shadow on a sunny day. And you just have to think about it. Money's money."

"You said that before," I said, laughing out at him. He was hot on money.

"She's away for six months," Grimes said, "and I hear the grub's fairish. The money's the same as the *Trinity's*, including the danger money. Course, they'll stop it like *that*," he said, flicking a finger and thumb, "soon's the firing finished they'll stop that."

"Listen," I said, "I'm going to have a talk with the missus. It's quick sailing, considering we only got in yesterday."

"There lies your danger, shipmate," he said, "unless, of course, your woman has something like a head to her. Look well ahead, see a clear horizon."

I said nothing, just sat looking at him, and I knew at once this was the kind of man to have as a shipmate, handy in any kind of jam, got a bit of brains to him, an understanding man.

"Let me think it over," I said.

"Righto."

He got up just as Sheila came into the kitchen. He seemed anxious to be off. Although she begged him to stay for a cup of tea, he said no he was anxious to be off, he'd a long way to go and it was a cold night. So off he went. I was glad in a way, now I could get things fixed up with Sheila. Be a shock to her, me sailing the next day, still it has to be done, and it will be done. I knew how right Grimes was. And now I was wishing he'd stayed, we could have fixed everything up.

"What did he come about, Johnny?"

"Business. Nothing more."

"You're going away, Johnny?" her voice was trembling already.

"I don't know, I don't know."

My mind was in a whirl. "She'll hate me sailing so soon, she'll hate it, I know she will."

I made my mind up then. I'd tell her when we went up to bed.

CHAPTER XVII

You can take any of half a dozen coloured trams in this town, and you can pay fivepence and go to the country. You can travel for hours and all the time wonder where so much brick came from, and watch a tram move snake-like round this corner, and round another, and still there's brick, and more of it. The tram can rattle down hill and stagger up another one, then roll like a ship on a level stretch of line, and all the time rattling, all the time tearing through a brick forest. Shut your eyes. Maybe when you open them again you'll find that bit of green your missus set her heart on.

There! I've opened them, and what do I see? Just more brick, sir. One day there'll be enough brick and enough mortar in this town to press it right flat and crush the life out of it, and maybe right into the sea.

"I say there, conductor, I know this place well, I mean this town, but I never knew there was so much brick went to make up a town. When the hell do we glimpse green?"

"Green," he said, and what a shuddering sort of laugh he had, showing me his black and rotten teeth, maybe it's the coldness in this morning air. "Green," he said, in between tram rattles, "green! Oh, hell!"

"I hope I'm talking the language of this country," I said. "I said, when do we see something green?"

The old tram stopped then, a bright red tram it was. Half a dozen people climbed on. Off we went again.

"Sheila, girl," I said, "are you all right, comfortable and that?"

"I'm all right, Johnny," she said.

"That's good. And Michael, how's he?"

"He's nice and warm. I hope it doesn't rain, Johnny," she said.

"I hope it doesn't, too," I said. I wasn't looking at her at all while I was talking, but at this conductor, his head jammed up against a frosted window. He was issuing tickets to the newcomers on the top deck. I never saw a man with such green teeth, and I certainly never heard such a shuddering kind of laugh he had.

"It's a fine bright morning for going to the country," he said, talking to a girl as fat and as round as a barrel.

"The country on a morning like this!" she said. "Oh lor!" She laughed, he laughed, and all that tram was tittering.

Damn their eyes. I moved closer in to Sheila.

"It won't be long now," I said, and just then the tram stopped again. I looked out through the window. It had pulled up near a grass verge. I stared out at this.

"Here you are," that conductor bawled at the top of his voice, we might all be stone deaf, "here you are. You get out here."

"Is this it?" I said.

"Looks like it," he said, all teeth again, "you get off here."

Then laughing outright, "They say green begins here."

"Righto!" I said, sharp, "save your bloody good humour for to-morrow, shipmate," and I took the kid in my arms, and Sheila led the way along that upper-deck.

It certainly was no morning for the country, and the kind of green my missus was after would be hard to find. All the same, we're here now, she wanted to come, we've come and it's done. We'll find some somewhere, sailor. Everybody stared after us as we went down the tram.

Sailor, I told myself, you're no good at all on a tram, and I wasn't either, bumped straight into a man near the door.

"Sorry, shipmate," I said, but he was dumb as dumb, and a winter look on his face. If I'd looked into a glass that minute I'll bet I was beetroot red. At last we got down off the tram.

"Best of luck, sailor," the conductor shouted, waving a hand.

I didn't half curse him, and away went the tram, and then we stood still and looked around us. We were here, safely through all those miles and miles of brick. Here it was—the country.

Sheila stood looking ahead. I stood there holding Michael, and I felt like a tramp. She took Michael in her arms.

"This isn't the country," she said.

"No! But it begins here somewhere, the conductor said it did, anyway."

"Let's move along now, Johnny," she said.

"O.K., girl."

And off we started. That air had a fine nip in it, and well ahead, on a land horizon, a line of mist, and through this I saw what looked like a field, and that green wasn't green. No, sir! I thought of the green where she came from, and I knew this green was fake. It *wasn't* green, it hadn't the heart to be green.

"This looks like a lane," Sheila said.

I said nothing except, "I'll carry the youngster, girl, you be as free and easy as you wish to be."

I couldn't help saying how I wished she'd chosen a better

sort of day, and then I was sorry I said it, because, confound everything, the girl had set her heart on it, and then I thought of what she'd hear from me before this day was over. This was the first time she'd travelled so far from the house.

"It's quite foggy around here, you can't *see* anything."

"Oh, you will, though, you will," I called back.

She was a few yards ahead of me, sort of pilot, finding the way to where that green was. No doubt it was somewhere about. Then I stopped dead. She went on walking. I let her walk. I didn't want to stop her, and I didn't want to budge an inch further myself. I was flabbergasted. "That conductor has played us a dirty trick," I told myself, played a mean trick on a sailor who's not used to a great sprawling town, and to that girl who knew less than I did, and all that cunning behind bricks and mortar.

Hell's bells, sailor, I cried inside me, you've landed in a cemetery. And I had. Believe me, that's where we'd landed, and that's where the country began.

"Sheila! Sheila! Half a minute, girl," I called out to her. That mist was thickening, and now she was a blurred outline to me. I walked on, and when I came on her I said, "The conductor's right. The country does begin here. We better walk on."

On we went. Talk about feeling queer in the middle of this.

"It's early yet, later the sun will come out," she said.

This was hope if you like, so we went on walking. Once I nearly bumped into a tree. But I wasn't thinking about any kind of tree, or any kind of green. No, sir. My mind was too full of a fine ship, too full of a hope of signing in her, and sailing in her, and giving Scupper Jack a race for his money. Signing this very day, and that fellow Grimes would be waiting on me.

"What on earth are you thinking of, Johnny?" she said suddenly. "You look like a man walking about in dreams. Give me the child," she said, and I gave him to her.

"You must find a place soon where you can sit down, girl," I said. "You must be tired."

We'd walked a fairish way now, that cemetery was far behind. Then it happened. Quick as lightning, the mist was rolling away and there were the fields, a whole lot of them stretching away ahead of us.

"Well," I said, "here's the very place, girl. This is the country, but I don't see much green about."

"The air's so good here, Johnny," was all she said, and little by little she was slowly drawing ahead again, like now she, too, was walking in dreamland. That kid had fallen nicely asleep in her arms. But a sleeping child's a heavy child, so I took him off her. We walked slowly on, passing down this long, narrow lane. "Oh look, Johnny," she said, "look."

"What's the matter?"

"There! Just look!"

I looked and there was a slight splash of something yellow lying on the bank.

"That's not green, darling," I said, laughing, "that's only an old dandelion."

"But it's so yellow. I must get it," she said. Bending down she pulled it up, and held it in her hand. She even smelt that flower.

"This would be a nice place to come to in the summer-time," I said.

"Oh, yes, do let's come in the summer, Johnny. I'd love to live here in the summer-time."

We were standing there, talking excitedly, just as though to-morrow would be summer, and then in came that damned ocean. Yes, sir, miles and miles of it, and there I was standing on the deck of that spanking ship.

I couldn't get that ship out of my head at all.

"Let's go on," she said. "I hope you didn't forget the sandwiches."

"No! I've got them here," I said, and all the time I was aboard this fine ship Grimes had been shouting about. I

wondered where that man was at this moment. I was walking on air.

"It has a bit of a smell," she said, pushing this flower right under my nose, but I never even smelt it. We walked on, and still I walked on air.

"Oh, do look, Johnny," she said, "do look." She was tugging away at my arm then.

Get an even keel, man, for God's sake, I told myself. Stop thinking of this blasted old ship. Where'd you think you are? This is no ship and she's in no sea. Wake up! Stop dreaming. You're taking your missus out for a walk in the country, because for a single day she wanted to forget all that brick and stone.

"Well I'll be blowed," I said, and that ship vanished. There was the kid smiling up at us, first time I'd seen such a knowing smile from him, and suddenly he actually laughed.

"It's the colour, Johnny," Sheila said, "it's this yellow flower."

Nothing pleased me so much as that, how much you can get out of an old dandelion.

When we came to the end of this lane we found a stile.

"Here we are, girl. Let's sit here and we'll eat the sandwiches."

"It would have been lovely if the sun had come right out," she said.

"Well, maybe I'll be home from a trip in the summer-time, then we will have a real day out in the country," I said.

There were just the three of us, lost in the middle of this quietness, not a sound anywhere. I think she liked this quiet as much as anything.

"I wonder what time the tram goes back," I said.

"We've only just come."

"I know, but we might as well get a good idea as to the time the tram reaches the terminus again. No use standing there for hours."

"What's on your mind, Johnny?" she said.

"Nothing! What makes you think there is?" I said, and stopped eating.

She made a clear dive to something else. "Take him," she said, and stood up.

I took the kid in my arms and she walked slowly away from us down that lane. And then she ran. Ran quick and sudden as though something were after her, ran like a deer and never stopped running till she reached a turn in the lane. She swung round then, called through her cupped hands: "Oh, it's lovely, Johnny! It's just lovely."

"That's fine," I cried back, and got up and went down after her.

Take one look at that face, sailor, and ask no questions. No need to. Just take a look and you can see she's a girl yet, see how for a minute or two she was thinking of a place as green as green, and being free, and running anywhere where green was.

"I am glad we came, Johnny," she said, then giving a great laugh, "but I know you didn't want to all the same."

"Of course I did. Mind you, it's not often that a sailor gets to the country."

"You can fib like the rest of them," she said, still laughing, then she pushed her head in between me and the kid. "You are good," she said. That made me feel on top of everything.

"How many things can you see, Johnny?"

"Me! Well, I can see you, and Michael here, and those two bare black trees, and right along this lane, and right through this thin hedge, and away to bare fields, but the grass has a sour look."

"I thought sailors had hawk's eyes," she said.

"Well, they have."

"But you can't see further than your nose. Look!" I looked.

"There!" she said. "Isn't that pretty?"

Hang it, I hadn't noticed, but it *was* pretty. These spiders had been working hard overnight, I reckon, and there, if you

looked properly, was a whole hedge shining with the dew on their webs. I laughed.

"You're quite right, girl. I'll have to buy a pair of spectacles."

"It'd be lovely to come here in the summer-time, Johnny."

"I'm sure it would."

"D'you think we could?"

"Might! All depends. Now if my horizon were full and clear I might be more definite, but at the moment it isn't. Come on now. Let's walk a bit, you'll get the shivers on a morning like this."

We came back past the stile where we'd sat and ate the sandwiches. I was again wondering what time it was. I carried Michael all the way back to the tram stop. You couldn't sit anywhere, no seats, so we stood, walked up and down. Now and again that girl would wander off to look at something. I'll say she had a fine pair of eyes. I just stood there holding the youngster, he was beginning to get a bit heavy, so I hoisted him up on my shoulder. Two people appeared as if from nowhere. They looked very respectable, didn't look at us, stood there very correct and looked at nothing. Neither spoke. Sheila came back. They stared at her. I stared over at them. Not a word said. Struck me as rather funny. The man coughed, the woman fidgeted with her hat.

"Give him to me," Sheila said.

I was glad of the rest. I lit my pipe and sent clouds of black shag smoke toiling up into the air, and I was still wondering what time it was, and when the tram would come. Those two started to talk, they *were* alive.

"What is the time, dear?" she said.

"Five past eleven," he said, the light glinted on his gold watch.

"Oh!"

Sheila stood closer to me. Now they both stared. Maybe they thought we were a couple of fools, out for a walk in the country on such a bleak day, and at that hour of the morning.

Who else but fools would choose a wintry February. Michael fell asleep. The man gave a sudden jerk of his head.

"Here it is," he said.

It was. It swung big and clumsy and red round the corner. Not a soul aboard. We all got on.

"Top, girl?"

"Yes, we'll go right in the front seat," Sheila said.

We went up and took a front seat, and made ourselves comfortable.

"He's fast asleep," I said.

"I know. The air's done him good, I'm sure."

She looked out through the window as soon as the tram started off.

"If it had been a nicer day," I said, "we might have stayed longer."

She didn't seem to hear, just went on looking out of the window.

"But next time I'm home, darling, which will be in the summer-time, perhaps, we'll have one long whole day out here. All the years I've been sailing out of this man's town, I've never been as far out as this."

She said nothing. I knew now that she wasn't there, not on that tram, not in this town, nor holding Michael, nor even married to a sailor. She was far, far away. Tell it the moment you looked in her eyes, far away in some fine country, on an island, perhaps, anywhere except on this tram. It could rock, sir. It could rattle and rock and roll, and jolt every thought in your head. That's what happened to my missus, every thought in her head jolting about this moment, but far from the tram, this very first day she'd steered clear of all that brick and stone.

Down the hill we went, she could take a list like any ship. I even began to feel dozy myself, and at last my eyes shut. The tram stopped and went on again. More and more people came on. Everybody seemed loud-mouthed this morning, perhaps it was the weather, it does make some people talk a lot. Michael

slept through it, as quiet and still as a dove tumbled home.

"Tintern Street," cried the conductor, a leathery-looking giant. "Tintern Street."

I got up, took the kid from her arms, and she rose up, but slowly, like she was coming out of a long, deep dream.

"We're home, girl," I said.

Take a look. There it is! All that sea of brick and stone, and just beyond it, the sea.

"We're home," I said.

"I know that, now," Sheila said.

We made our way down the deck, in two minutes we were in the street where we lived. At last! As soon as I shut the door she took Michael from me and went off upstairs.

I got the fire going again, put the kettle on, made things shipshape for some sort of meal. Later, I took her up a cup of tea. "Here's a lovely cup of tea," I said.

"Where's yours?"

"Downstairs."

"Bring yours up here, Johnny," she said.

I went down and came up with the whole trayful of stuff.

"It was nice," she said, "I did enjoy it, even though the weather wasn't too good. It was like where I came from, except for the greenish."

"Oh, I am glad," I said, and I meant every single word of it. Well, well! And it was all sort of sealed by a bit of a yellow weed.

"I know what's on your mind, Johnny," she said. "No need to explain."

"What's on my mind?"

"A ship! I knew as soon as that Mr. Grimes called. It is, isn't it?"

"That's quite correct, girl. It is. And she's signing this very afternoon, and a rare spanker of a ship they say she is. You see what I like is always having you get the regular money, and it's bad for a sailor to be hard bound too long."

She put her cup down and came and sat by me on the bed.

"I understand, Johnny, I quite understand. I've learned a lot, and maybe I'll learn a lot more."

"Come here," I cried, and caught her in my arms. "You're fine, Sheila, you're so sensible. By God! Marrying you was the best thing that ever was."

"What was?"

"Marrying you, of course."

She ran her hand through my hair. "I'm so happy now," she said.

"You still know that song I taught you long ago," I said. "You know, that old sailor's song. 'There's a fine time and a gay time and a golden time coming to you'?"

She laughed outright. "Why, that's your name," she said.

"My name?"

"Yes, Golden Johnny."

We were both laughing. I felt so glad about everything now that I could have rushed out anywhere and picked up a whole acre of anything green just to hand it to her. Oh, yes, sailor. Your missus does like the country.

"There's a knock."

"I wonder who it is," I said.

"It's your Mr. Grimes," she said, "you know it is. I won't stop you from doing anything that's right, Johnny. Go off now," she said.

I gave her a quick kiss and dashed off downstairs. It *was* Grimes.

"Hello, shipmate," he said, as soon as I opened the door.

"All set?"

"I'm all set," I said.

"Let's away, then."

I jammed my cap on and put on my coat, then called upstairs that I was going. "Won't be long, girl, so long now, I won't be long, Sheila, I promise you that." She never replied. I knew it was all right.

Off we went towards this spanking ship.

CHAPTER XVIII

Look anywhere you will, look anywhere you like, and there's men moving your way, as though the whole sailor world had heard there was a spanking ship signing on this day. Grimes and me got aboard all right, counted scores of men, hundreds, all looking for a job in her. Grimes was lucky, and so was I. And here I am now, right in the middle of her, and right on top of her. She's away, heading for a sea. I'm busy, plenty of work here, here's a ship just under the twenty-five thousand tons, a fine-looking ship, got a line to her, but not much of a girth. Something lady-like about her long, thin funnel. And a long, high thin note to her horn. Blow, lady, blow, blow your way out of this town. Before this trip is ended you'll know what she's like.

"Let her go fore and aft. Stand by that fall! Hi, hi, there!"

O.K., sir. She's going fore and aft. I unreave this fall.

And while I'm doing it I'm giving her a good look over, this ship called *Eagle*. Grimes is behind me, swinging on the derrick like any fool kid. Get the sea into your nostrils, lady, I wonder what's coming to you this fine trip, and to the men aboard her. Yes, you look as delicate as a lady, maybe as warm as one. I'll find that out soon enough.

Not a bad name you got, means something to a sailor when a ship has a good name. But can she live up to it. That's what counts.

Away we go down that river. She rides clean, and that's good. Sky's greyish.

"Ship away and make tidy there."

"O.K., sir."

The sky might be greyer, it might have rained, but it hasn't, and the light's not too bad. Rain spoils a sailor's going-away day. But you have a feeling she'll be all right, that's what counts. Clean, and lady-like, and without the fidgets.

"Foc'sle head there, Manion, and help tidy up."

"Hi, hi," I shout, swing a loose leg, and nicely drop to that number three hatch, away for'ard and up the ladder. The bosun's there, and five of his watch, and a lofty sort of man standing chewing at her windlass. He spits clean.

"That's right! Ship shape and tidy," the bosun says.

He keeps looking at me, you know that kind of look, and you understand a lot about it. Here's a ship that doesn't give a hang about how long a sailor might be out and hard bound to a quay. Here's a crew so cosy and warm to this ship, you say to yourself, "these men have never been out of her since she was builded," and you know that where they live, fore and aft, foc'sle cabin, or plain room, their carpet slippers are peeping out knowingly from under bunks. That's home, and more than home. They're fast to her, never leave her. It looks like this ship is a spanker after all.

Here's this bosun looking my way again, what a proper tub of a man he is, and that mouth! Lord! There's a bit of history there, sir.

"Say there!" he calls out.

I'm holding on with two others to the bight of that hawser, still drenched with sea, and a powerful weight to it. I drop my hold and go up to him.

"Hi, hi, bosun."

"You're Manion? John Manion?"

"That's me!"

"I forgot what you said your last ship was."

"Trinity."

"What kind of a man's ship is she?"

"She was dumpy, often begrudging, catch a man out any time, blacker than hell with a mood, too. Anything else?" smiling.

"Sure," he says, "a heck of a lot else. *This is a ship, sir.*"

Give him a look, sailor. Yes, he's rare proud of a ship called *Eagle*. Why, his chest heaves with it. I'll bet there's hairs on it.

"Well, what else, bosun?"

"Splice a piece of wire when asked, put a bight in one toute-suite?"

Why, sailor, this man knows French.

"Easy," I say.

"Oh! . . ." he says, watching these others watch us.

"Cast a lead?" he says.

"Ha, ha."

"Take a small boat round this ship in a bad sea?"

"Ha, ha," nice and soft in his ear.

"Rig up a chair without falling out of it?"

"Ha, ha."

"Not so much of your ha-ha-ing," he says.

Sailor, you must ha, ha, you must smile inside you, here's a feather-bed bosun if ever there was one. What next will he ask a sailor?

"You're in my mate's watch. Step aft and let him see you lively."

Aye, aye! And off I went, casual, along her well-deck, quickened my pace where she flushed, and then I met up with him hanging on to a hydrant amidships, checking up what force of water he's going to get through it for washing her down. Jenkins his name was, short as short, but wiry, a muscle and bone man.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Me! Manion. Bosun told me to come along and join your crowd. Here I am."

"All right, Manion, get below and ask that donkeyman, no, ask that engineer, when he's going to release enough water for this ship to keep her self-respect. Goddam and blast his eyes, he's always the same, and tell him to send it up right now, been waiting here ten minutes already. Hell's fire, men hanging around here with their hands empty. . . ."

That kind of man he was, jumpy, hell hot, fiery, sort of electric charge to him all the time. Without a doubt this man would cry aloud whenever she was in a jam, on a black night, or in a dirty sea. I could see he'd a rare opinion of his own

about this *Eagle's* appearance. Not a bad thing in a bosun, provided that ship's worth it. Likes her snappy, always spick and span.

I went away down the alleyway, through the steel door, and there they were. The old ladders, down and up and up and down I'd been many a time, these old steel ladders. Look down at all that shining stuff, and those wheels moving, those pistons threshing about like wild horses. And this time I wasn't firing, and I had a queer feeling for a minute or two, stood looking down into her engine-room. Then I went down. When I came to her engine-room I found a fat man, all rosy and hot with it, never saw one so fat as he was.

"Oh, yes?" he says.

"Are you the second engineer?"

"Well?"

I gave him the message, and he stood up from the job he'd been stooped over. I thought he'd yawn, but he didn't. Man, see that monument of fat starting to move, his stretched-out arms, his chest out, and then smiling all down it, all down this fat. I liked him, yes, sir. Buried somewhere inside it was a good heart. That's how he looked to me, anyhow.

"That feller again?" he said.

I nodded my head, grinned, watching this engineer, rosy face covered with oil smears, watching him laugh, at last I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. Jenkins."

"Damn that man. You tell him straight from me, straight, I said, I'll send him up a force of water all right, and you tell him to keep clear of her scuppers, just in case he should get washed down one."

"Yes, sir."

I went back up the ladder. Every step up, and every thought I had, this fat man was in it, fat as fat and jolly with it. Now she was beginning to look like the sort of ship I'd wanted all along. I thought of that *Starbound* ship of mine.

"If you're like her, then you're the very ship for me."

I came up to her deck. There they were, every man of them

working away under Jenkins' watchful eye. Ha, ha! That's the eye would please an owner any time, shipmate.

"You're diver to this watch," Jenkins said, "pick her up."

I picked up the powerful heavy hose, leather and brass-studded with it, and any God's amount of wild water in it, talk about fiery serpents, that engineer was certainly giving Mr. Jenkins the stuff he wanted. After we'd washed her down, he sent us aft to have a whiff in the wheelhouse there. And from here I can now see the whole length of the *Eagle*. A fine-looking boat all right, and tidy's the word. But how a boat looks is no hall-mark on perfection. There are other things to find out, which I soon did when we went for'ard at eight bells. A foc'sle, like any foc'sle, bulk-head and deck-head and chain locker noises, that occasional thud against her plates, keep a nervy sailor off his slumbers. All these men are strangers to me. My bunk was the bottom one nearest the door. That was the only thing I had against this *Eagle* ship.

First come best served. This dies hard aboard any ship. First bunk is best bunk, that's a kind of law. Here you are, sailor, take what's left you, right by the door, on the edge of work, on the brink of sleep. O.K., sir, you're new to this ship, she'll get your measure all right, and so will these shipmates.

This foc'sle is like Parliament, every man can talk about something that's interesting, every man has an opinion on this ship, on this and that man, on the state of the world, their minds alive. And I can warm to it, reflecting on months with that dumb Elson, and that scruff of a man named Dove. I undressed and turned in. You can't see yourself for smoke. I just gave two big yawns and never woke again till I heard that old cry about showing your leg. Seemed like I'd only been in my bunk five short minutes. My mate on top of me was a chap named Molton. We went out on deck together. He started talking to me, while we were waiting for Jenkins.

"Your first trip aboard this one," he said.

"That's right," I said. "They say she's a real spanker, but she has to live up to it."

That made my mate laugh loudly.

"Spanker! Oh, Christ!" and he laughed again, louder than before.

"Why, man, this is a real old man's boat," he said. "These are all carpet-slipped sailors, born on her when she was built, break up with her, too, I guess, maybe in some dark Northern yard. Jenkins is an owner's man."

"Oh, aye."

"Yes, and glued to this *Eagle* like there wasn't another ship in the wide world."

"I had my doubts about him."

"You sailed with a chap named Grimes."

"Yes," I said, "he's in the opposite watch."

"Damn fine sailor," Molton said. He began picking his teeth. He turned to look seawards so I got a good look at him. About thirty-five, bit of the eagle in his nose, sallow faced, long thin arms, well tattooed, going thin on top, sort of quick and jerky chap, jack-in-the-box movements whenever he was on a job. Liked the look of him all the same, and might as well since we'll be bunk mates for seven months or more.

Still waiting for that blasted man Jenkins. We got talking, Molton and me.

"Grub's not too bad," I said.

"Not too bad at all."

"Some say she's on a scavenging trip. That's new on me, shipmate."

Molton grinned. "Nothing much to it. Slinking round every port in the bloody universe to pick up a bit of cargo, which means not too much distress in the boardroom."

"Boardroom?"

How ignorant you are, sailor. Boardroom.

"Directors' meeting," Molton said.

I laughed. "You ought to stand for Parliament, too," I said. "She's a swell-looking ship to be going scavenging anyhow," I said.

The air here is so good you want to eat it. Certainly in a

few days' time we'll be eating like horses. Just then Jenkins came out.

"Get going there," he shouted.

Hell's bells, he woke up sour, tell at once. Maybe got a liver or something, a bad mood and the weight of it's too much for him. Or is it this wind coming up. I know some men hate wind as they do fog, or snow and ice, or a becalming on any homeward-bound voyage.

"Christ, man! Get going," Jenkins bawled.

"I am," I said, though he never said what he wanted me to get going on.

"Then get going then."

"All right, all right," I growled back. "This isn't the goddam slave trade, shipmate, bosun or no goddam bosun."

"Get climbing."

"O.K., Mr. Jenkins," I said.

"I mean get climbing quick, which is now," he shouted.

Talk about a bull roaring, everybody stared at him. He had a mood on him all right. He could roar, yet you wouldn't think he had it in him, but it just shows that men take a lot of knowing.

"All right, Mr. Jenkins. Keep your shirt on," I said. "I'm climbing. Watch me."

I felt in my belt to see if I had the spun yarn there, then I got going. Up I go, and a rare pile of wind aiming to press me back, and down, down, down every rung climbed. Hold her, sailor, that man Jenkins is still watching. And he *is*, too. He's like a cat, always watching everybody aboard. By heck! He can get the last inch out of a sailorman. Just wait till I see that man Grimes in the next dog-watch. We'll have it out about spanker ships.

"You can get the last inch out of a sailor, Mr. Jenkins, but if you could get it out of a tall glass of beer you'd be a man, but you just can't," I said to myself.

Still going up. When you reach truck-top you can have a look at this sea, you'll be higher up than any

man aboard her, see further, feel more on your own, and quiet with it. Believe me, quietness is rare on a ship that's run by a maiden aunt who calls himself a bosun's mate. In your little steel kingdom when you take your turn at look-out, why you'll be a king, sailor. Still climbing. Look far out, plenty of ocean about. Turn round, have a look aft, size up this *Eagle* ship from on high. My! There's a ship-shape boat for you, there's a tidy little house. Wouldn't be surprised if any minute that Jenkins' missus suddenly came out of his cabin in the port alleyway, started scrubbing the deck on her knees, cleaning those too bright windows on a bridge.

Ah! How she swung then, tear all that sky open with a mast-top, some swing to her when she has the fancy for it. Look aft again, sailor, and I did. First thing came into my head was that fine *Starbound's* deck, aye, I was a kid then, cried out and asked her which way she was going. That was a fine morning, sailor. Suppose I cry now.

Hey there, *Eagle*, how'd you go, how do you go? And here I am. At top. I looked down. "Hey there, Mr. Jenkins, I'm up top now." I got going with my yarn.

"Lashed and made fast there?" he bawled up.

"I've made her fast and secure, she's all right now."

"All right," he bawled up, "but don't stand up there looking as if you owned the bloody boat," which got my goat at once, but I never said anything, no need to, knew that man Jenkins inside out now, knew his mate, any time, and from sheer habit they could kiss a backside. Those kind of men. I came down, went off with Molton on a tying-up job aft. He was a good sailor all right. Knew that in three minutes. Do any manner of job with a rope.

"That Holt and that feller, Dones," I said, "they seem to creep round after their good father," meaning Jenkins, of course, and Molton was laughing no end then.

"Ah, ha, you sized them all up, too?"

"You bet. You new to this ship?"

"I am."

"Like her?"

"Give me time. I left a man's ship to come to this one."

"One always does," I said, laughing.

"He's coming after us again," Molton said.

"Who is?"

"S-s-h!" he said.

That man was behind us all right. Just then four bells rang out.

"You get up on the look-out," Jenkins said, "relieve Murphy."

"O.K., Mr. Jenkins."

Away up I went and relieved Murphy.

The wind's rising higher now. I pull that dodger a little higher, turn up my reefer jacket, hug myself closely. Keep your eye glued on that ocean, man, that's your job for the next two hours. I looked well out and around me.

There's a fine never-ending always heaving sea for you, blue running out of it, and fast turning to grey, may have it three days grey. Perhaps one damn black day, never know your luck, or a sudden green, a very sudden green. Ah, but that'll be channel, and on the homeward bound trip, sailor. That's the nearest stretch of water to where your missus lives. Yes, I was thinking about her as I stood there, and little Michael, and that little flame of hair sticking from under his bonnet. But suppose she was here now, right now, in this steel box with me, why first thing that man Jenkins would say is, "*No kissing on look-out.*" I don't think he likes me very much. No matter. Pull that dodger up, wind's getting weight behind it. All fine and dandy now.

She heaves. Stand easy there, and just heave with her. My! There's a heave and ho for you. That sea's flat, shut your eyes, open them and it isn't. By God, it's a racing hill of water coming down, crash on her head. Now I'll get your measure,

Eagle. See how she takes a real sea. Let her come. Talk about thunder. She's had it.

Up with your nose, *Eagle*.

Higher than high here, sailor, makes you think of lower than low, belly depth, walking this moment on a steel deck, the next on air. That's a feat, walking on air, and holding a hard grip to an empty barrow. Ah! I can see that man Jenkins far below, recognise him anywhere, and the crowd with him, hen, and chickens following. One day he might even cluck like one. Wonder what job they're off to now. Got a guess coming that I don't like Jenkins. You bet I don't. Careful, man, get a grip on something. I did just as she gave a hell's heave. She's full up with a mood this minute, she'll pitch you out of this nest if you don't watch out. I'm thinking of that Molton feller. Says he's getting out of *Eagle* when she docks, out for good. Holy smoke! Ah, well, that's how it is. No sailor finds the ship that answers to his dreams, all that's wanted in a topsy-turvy world is one fine ship. Never satisfied, always looking for the best ship that ever was.

I think of Sheila and that kid, of that walk in the country, of a trip home in the summer-time, a whole day doing nothing except enjoy the air, and she'll enjoy the green. Christ, sailor, this makes you sentimental. Stow it away. How the hell can you. All my life I've aimed for a dream ship. Where is she?

O sailor! Where rides this ship, this heart's ship and soul's ship, in what sea, in what ocean, by what man owned, to what quay and tidy does she lie when voyaged home. Where is she, sailor, this ship that is *all* ship, and man's ship besides? Where, oh where? On some horizon where gold is, or blue is, or music is, by what cape or reef pass, through which water lane ply, where, sailor, where is this great ship, oh wonder ship, with all power to disown or defeat a sea, and turn her back on a raging ocean, could sail these triumphant, sea or ocean, yet never belong, holding that power to defeat, to be free and independent, towering away above all other ships, owned by seas, never belonged to a man. Count ships by thousands and tens of

thousands, sail world over and back again, and all of them sailing wide, where is the one a man can call his own? Where, sailor, where?

In some region towards heaven, that's where they are, anchored in gold. Shake yourself, show a leg there, sailor, show a leg. Here's that man Jenkins below again, looking up, watching you, blast his crying eyes. Unshackle these foolish thoughts, man, overboard they go, one and all, sailor, toss them away. Show a leg, show a leg. Here's that relief coming up. Have I been two hours up here, and just dreaming? Hell's fire! Here he is right beside me.

"Hello there, shipmate. You want all you can carry this watch up. She's settling herself down for a spell of dirty weather."

"O.K., Manion," this relief says.

"So long."

"So long."

Give me four minutes and I'm on her level deck again. I stand and stare, hell's bells, you're even rubbing your eyes, you might have been sleeping instead of keeping your eye on a sea.

"What the hell you standing there for, Manion?" It's Jenkins again. "Why don't you get for'ard. Eight bells just struck. Don't you want a watch below?"

"Course I do, I'm just going in now."

"Then go in. And remember, this ship's no dream boat."

That's right, sailor, this ship's no dream boat. I go for'ard.

CHAPTER XIX

SING a song, sailor, sing a song, cried sea.

And he kept on singing.

"By God! That chap can talk."

"When they're in a fever they generally do."

"Are you trying to be subtle or something. You go and take

your turn and lie on him. One thing we got to do on this goddam raft is to keep this tearing bloody wind off him."

"But he won't last long. He's just sort of ballast to this raft."

"Get going and less mouthing outer you. It's your turn to lie on him. Go and lie on him."

"O.K. Jesus! My bones ache."

"So do mine. But do your duty by a shipmate just the same."

"I'm going."

"Then go and less guff."

He went away, the other man dragged himself back. Then he lay flat.

"How you feeling, chum?"

"Not too bad, not too good."

"You trying to be subtle, too," forcing a laugh, this hurt.

"All the time I was lying on him he was dreaming and mouthing out of him, such talk, such drivel, such stuff. Poor bastard. Has a missus named Sheila, has a kid named Mike. Poor sod! But he may get through."

"We'll all hope that much, shipmate, it costs you nothing to hope."

"I got rattled when he talked about smoke. Must have been dreaming he was on the look-out in some kind of boat, got me rattled, I was thinking of smoke. Oh hell, my mind's thick with smoke, smoke, smoke."

"One thing you got to do on a raft is not think of anything that adds any weight to your mates. Understand me! If smoke comes it comes, and if it comes, it's a Christ-sent ship. Otherwise, well. . . . I'm tired, shipmate, tired."

"Wonder if we'll get through?"

No answer.

"Wonder how long Manion will go on talking like that. Thinks somebody's talking to him. Thinks the sea's asking him to sing songs. Laugh. No, I can't laugh. I can't cry either, can't do nothing. Say, shipmate, are you asleep there?"

No answer.

"Shipmate, *shipmate!* Don't fall asleep, it's getting dark.
Please don't. I'm not scared, I mean I'm not . . ."

Silence.

"Wonder what day it is?"

"Wonder what time it is?"

"Wonder when this man's war will be over?"

"Wonder what I'd look like if I drowned?"

"Wonder what I'd feel like if a big plate of steak and onions and tomatoes, and mushrooms and pepper and salt and bread and butter and glasses of ale and . . . I wonder if I . . ."

"Wonder if Manion will die?"

"Shipmate, talk a bit, oh Christ, talk a bit."

No answer.

Ask what you like, sailor, ask any question you will. There are no answers.

Raft heaved and the sea heaved.

CHAPTER XX

"HELLO there!"

"Oh, hello, Grimes," I said.

We met up so suddenly under that foremast we were both surprised. We talked.

"Where're you off to?" he says.

"Me! Up to that nest," I said. "Seems Mr. Jenkins has a rare high opinion of my abilities as a look-out man. By the way, shipmate, I thought you said this ship was a spanking ship. Except she's kept tidy by old men I can't see anything particularly fine about her. In fact, she's like any other ship."

"Well," he said, "I like that," he chuckled about it. "Mean to say you didn't know all the time that she was no spanker, just a ship where a man can earn a living and keep off hard stones in a town. More fool you, then."

"Course I knew, course I knew, and so do you know, ship-

mate, that every new ship to a sailorman might be called the Queen of Heaven, that's how he looks at it, anyhow."

"Listen to the lovely bells," Grimes said.

I was listening to them striking eight o'clock. Up came Jenkins. Hell's bells, that owner's man is always so close I expect to find him in my pocket one morning.

"Why don't you move," he shouted.

"Am moving, Mr. Jenkins."

"Then bloody well move then."

What language that man uses, sailor. Away I start climbing to that nest. I relieve Johnson, ask him what she's like this morning, he says, middlin', goes down, I settle myself in that nest. I take a look to starboard, I begin scratching my head.

Goddam! That man Johnson's got no eyes at all. Why, that's something away to starboard, yes, sir, about two points starboard. And it looks like a ship. Two on that bell, sailor, and quick. I jerked the rope twice. Yes, that's smoke over there, without a doubt of it, real smoke. Ah! They've woke up on the bridge, too, they've seen something. How far is she off, man? Where's my glasses? Yes, she looks like a ship all right. Guess how far off. Say, ten miles, fifteen, twenty. No! Take a look. By God! It is a ship, and a big one, too. Drop those glasses. Wipe your eyes, this ship's heave and ho might make you dizzy in a minute, make a cradle for your thoughts to rock in. Look again. Right! Yes, and she's bearing hard down. Welcome ship! Then I look down at this *Eagle* boat, my own boat. She can make a nice pattern in a blue sea, break a long line of water, and when you aren't just squared for it, rip sky open with her mast top, catch you out, sailor, and fling you around. Ring that bell again. Yes, she's coming hard down, swinging away to port of us. By heck, she's speedy. Who in hell's steering that man's ship? Look again. Good heavens, sailor, she's right abeam. They've got her measure on that bridge. These days you have to be careful about what you get the measure of, is she a raider? I wonder. Hello! Let's have those glasses again. Why, her quarter-

master's sending up a signal. Let them go, man. That's a fine sight on a windy day, all kinds of colours bravely flying at her halliards. Lord! Here she is.

What's all this, sailor, why are all those insects moving about on her funnel? Men! Holy smoke! They are men. What are they doing? Painting that funnel. Rub your eyes, man, here's a miracle happening. Painting all her grey away, all that grey going, hell's bells, there's half a dozen bosun's chairs swinging madly round that funnel. Here's people running to her rail. Waving. Flags flying, sweat-rags, handkerchiefs, waving, waving, can't believe it. Am I dreaming? This high stand I take making me dizzy? Being so used to being down, in a bunker, perhaps that's it, I'm just dreaming things. Shake yourself. Show a leg, sailor. Wake up. This is a miracle happening. There she goes. A signal. Read it! My God! Half a minute. Keep cool there, hold on hard, this *Eagle's* starting to heave and tear about like some goddam devil out of hell. All right. Now read it. Can't hold myself. It's true, yes, it's true. Sing, sailor, clap your hands, dance if you like. There it is, flying fine at her halliards, on this windy day. Proclaim then, proclaim fine ship, and all you men aboard her, proclaim this goddam man's war is finished. Hell! If there was enough room to spare in this ice-box I'd dance a jig, stand on my bloody head. Look down. There's a man moving away for'ard on his own, insect from this height, it might be Mr. Jenkins refusing to look at that signal, might bring an end to his carpet-slipper days aboard this *Eagle*. You never can tell. Shout down to him, let it go, everything you've got, here's a pressing weight you got to get rid of. Get it off your chest, man.

Hey, there! Below there! Sailor, are you blind? Look out at that fine bit of colour telling us this man's war is over, done with, finished. Read it, Mr. Jenkins. I can, anyhow. Feel it all over you, under you, round you, feel a bit dizzy, a bit thick in the throat, it's all over. Yes, sir, *over*. Laugh, shout, sing, every word of it true. Hurrah! That miracle's

happened. Knock hell out of that bell, sailor, give a damn to anything, ring it and go on ringing it, all your feeling inside you, from gut upwards. A fine grey ship changing colour, clearing out her drab, clearing it all out, straightening herself up at last, *being* herself, hurling away scuffle and skulk, and all the things pressing her down and shutting her out, let it all go, paint it out, paint something good in. And let her sail home all out and gallant, flying her flags, and all stretches of sea are hers, and no dodging, no more zig-zag and no more crazy circles. And no more tin fish, sailor.

Sing, sailor. This is News.

They're painting her funnel fast from grey to blue, that's fine. Reckon she's one of those Blue Funnel beauties, strange in this western ocean. She'll be free to move where she likes best, and in a sea she knows, you can tell she's greyhound blood to her. What waving! Damn! I can hardly stand still. Count every second and minute till you whizz down that zigging, hear all the talk in foc'sles, port and starboard, hear a man laugh and not feel he's kidding himself, and if there's some cold tea left in the can, why, we'll drink a health to the best day that ever was.

Ride *Eagle*, ride home fast. Show your paces. No more lurking about, no more sly moves and doubling back on yourself, sail open and free. Christ! I can't stay still. I want to jump right down to her deck, do a jig. Three bells. Ring them like you never rang them before. Come on, Time, move around, come on, *Eagle*, let's sail fast for the quay we both know. Let's get ready for that fine big time. Hello, who's this climbing up? My relief. Stop dreaming and wake up. Yes, by God! Eight bells struck and for the first time in my life I haven't heard them. Here's my relief. Tom Sliney it is.

"Heard the news?" he says.

"You bet! In you come. Any tea left in the can down there?"

"Maybe you'll find something, maybe you'll find nothing. Shift yourself and let a man get in, that's if you want relieving."

Saying nothing to that, I climb out on the other side and he steps in. Over he comes, ballooned out in a reefer and an army greatcoat, this man believes in looking after number one. Balaclava helmet and a sou'wester over that, a pair of thick mitts, a fine pair of high boots. He's all clothes.

"Hello, you've been drinking," I said.

"Aye! Tot of rum for all hands. Jenkins' issuing some on skipper's orders."

"That man Jenkins. I don't believe it."

"Go and find out then," he says.

"You believe in looking after yourself, shipmate. Are you sure you wouldn't like a loan of my top coat," and smiling back at him I started off down that mast.

Stretch yourself and get the cramps out of your system. Hold a minute, man, she's going to heave over. At last I was down, then went straight for'ard. That man Jenkins was issuing rum. I got mine in two shakes. I sit down by my bunk. I'm alongside half a dozen men sipping rum like they might be the best wine tasters in France. All the best, shipmate, all the best to everybody. This foc'sle is thick with smoke, thick with the smell of rum, and thick with words. No man can sleep. Here's a war over this very day, open wide your arms, sailor, and take what's coming. Who the devil wants to sleep now? Here's a time for singing and making plans, any amount of dreaming, and everybody building up something in his mind, none of your fairy castles either.

A chap named Morton started singing in his bunk, he'd a huge voice, you could hear it all over the ship. He wasn't sleeping this watch down, no sir, he was going to sing. And he went on singing. O.K., shipmate, you feel happy, that's fine, everything's fine to-day, end of a bloody old war. Sing away, sing away.

"Now then! Cut all that goddam row out will you. Some man wants to sleep."

In came that bosun. Jenkins' mate. Wasn't smiling, no sir.

Just looking like it was a very ordinary day. This man Morton went on singing at the top of his voice.

"Pipe down, will you?" that bosun growled up at him.

Morton drew his curtain back, looked down at this owner's snooper.

"Why, you look fair worried to-day, bos," he says, grinning down at him.

"That's enough of that bloody row."

"What row, bos?" still grinning at him.

"That row."

"Damn and blast, man, why this here's a great day for sailormen, for their missuses and kids, for every sailor's Jane. Why the hell don't you smile, man, the cock-eyed war's all over."

"It'll be one great day when this ship's tied up," the bosun said, "and I'll see to it not a man Jack of you signs back in her."

Hear those men laughing now, sailor.

"Keep your stinking ship, many a better one'll be crying out for good men, Mr. Bosun. When she ties up we'll be out of her, and you can have your chinks and your niggers and your lascars and coolies and all the rest of them, and when you get them you and your mate Jenkins can have a drink with the owner and drink to your bloody fortunes. But men will back out of her."

"That's enough from you, lawyer," the bosun shouted. He turned and was going out.

"Good shuttins," cried one.

"Jenkins and you was born on this ship, then, damn you, sink with her."

But he was gone out, and that door slammed. Talking stopped, singing stopped. One curtain after another is drawn across a bunk. Silence. Dead, cold silence.

Now you'll be able to hear the mice, shipmate, that's how quiet the foc'sle is. But quiet or noisy, lousy or rat-ridden, those two men can't do anything about it, Mr. Jenkins and his

mate, they can do nothing. This day a war's over, and soon this ship will be home, and we'll all be clear of her. She may be called *Eagle* but she's no spanker, and Grimes was wrong. Mr. Jenkins may kiss any number of backsides, but real sailors won't.

I lay in my bunk but I couldn't sleep. And I could hear the other men fidgeting and tossing in their bunks. I was thinking and thinking. Now this war is over, a man can make plans. You can get out to 'Frisco, sailor, back to that bright Pacific, or you can remain where you are. I thought of that fine time and that big time and that golden time that I'd promised to Sheila, and all over the wide world you could hear them singing about it coming along.

O.K., sailor. It'll come without a doubt. Don't worry yourself, just go to sleep. And I did, too, never woke up till I heard that cry of show a leg.

CHAPTER XXI

*Not a man move, not a ship move, fine gentlemen said
Not a wheel turns, not a sound stirs, that day she read.*

AND the woman whose man was on the *Thespis* and the *Aranian* and the *Truculent* and the *Dernian* was coming along, and Sheila saw her. She watched her coming along, but not through any jungle of brick, nor any forest of stone, but over a sailor's Plain, far stretching, wilderness, but no sailor there. No sailor was before a boiler or under a fire-door, stood four square fore or aft, nor peered from any nest, swung at no truck-top, tossed in no sea and slept in no bunk. Yet none on this Plain.

Sheila saw her coming along, so she stood and waited for her, and she was all the time watching her. Her ears heard nothing but great silences.

All that shouting is over.

All that singing.

All that cheering.

The world is free again, free for you, sailor, free for the rats.

"How slowly this old woman walks," Sheila thought. "I do believe she counts every stone."

As far as she looked was Plain, and as far Silence, she heard nothing except that clatter and plod of the old woman's heavy boots, which were man's boots, striking hard upon stones. "How slowly she walks." She started to move towards her, and the old woman stopped.

Look from here to the sea, and between sea and you there is nothing, nothing this day.

Where are you, sailor?

Gone down somewhere, gone under anywhere.

"Good morning, dear," the old woman said. Her name was Elizabeth Bryant.

"Good morning," Sheila said.

She put her hand through the old woman's arm, and they walked along, back by the way Sheila had come. And all the way down this road, wind swept and clean, and across it, and all the way down the street to the door of the house where she lived, nothing was said, what can you say crossing a Plain on a windy day except that it stretches God knows where.

Said nothing, understood each other, held words back, this was not habit, this was the law, and this was the link to what had come from behind shouts, and many a bright colour, from behind bands and hands waving, and much cheering, and that was yesterday, and that is a century ago.

"How are you this morning, Mrs. Bryant?"

"I'm not *too* bad, dear, but do call me Lisa. Nobody calls me anything except old, but my man on the *Senator* knows my name is Lisa and he calls me that."

Sheila gave a little laugh. "All right, I'll call you Lisa."

"Is this where you live, dear?" Mrs. Bryant said.

"This is where we live."

She turned a key in the lock, pushed back the door and stood aside to let the old woman in. Then she went in and closed the door after her.

"Make yourself nice and comfortable here," Sheila said, "and rest yourself. That was a long walk you had this morning."

Mrs. Bryant sat down. She watched Sheila poke a fire which was of cinder and ash and some tea-leaves, then she went outside and the old woman could hear the rattle of crockery.

"Oh, please don't make me any tea, dear," she called out.

"But it's made, Lisa," Sheila called back to her, and came in with everything that was necessary, took a boiling kettle from the hob, made tea, and then sat herself down by her companion.

"This tea will do you good," she said.

"I'm an old nuisance, that's all."

The fire was a little brighter now and Sheila drew in her chair.

"Where is your man?"

"Out."

"And the little man?"

"Out," Sheila said.

"Oh! Where is he?"

She looked at Sheila, and waited, but the girl said nothing.

He is in no definite place, no directions are necessary, there is nothing that you can do anywhere you go, no reason in it, and no results from a walk anywhere.

Mrs. Bryant was partly deaf, and seeing the girl's lips move, she thought she had said something which she hadn't caught, and now she said again:

"Where? Where did you say?"

And Sheila said nothing. She looked away from the old woman, she looked at a window, but nothing outside this except a wall.

"Have another cup of tea," Sheila said.

Handing it over she said, laughingly, "I believe you read tea-cups. I heard from the baggage man that you did. Him that Johnny calls the Walrus on account of his moustache."

"I read nothing, dear. You make a most beautiful cup of tea."

She stared hard at the girl, she went on staring.

"You'll soon give suck to another," she said.

Through tired eyes she saw a world dimly, but not this girl's smile, she saw this clear and a breast's exultant rise and fall, and now she smiled.

"And did you know, dear, that when you married a sailor you would carry a weight, and feel always a pressure, like I did once, just *here*," pointing, "just under here where a child sucks."

"I know all that."

"Do you know a sea can wear you out, a sea knows it wears you out, but you don't."

"I know that, too."

"I'll be going down as usual on Friday morning, dear, about the same time. I'll call for you."

Sheila thought of Johnny, of Michael, she wondered where they were at this moment, all the time her eyes were on Mrs. Bryant, but she remained silent. A child's hand and a man's face rose up, these closed about her mouth, so she could not answer about going down on Friday morning with a woman whose husband was on six ships at once. She rose from the chair. Mrs. Bryant's cup clattered in her saucer, she turned and took it off her, at the same time thinking, "How long he is, I wonder where he is with that child."

"A beautiful cup of tea, dear. You know I don't yet know your name."

"Sheila."

"Oh yes. A nice name for a girl. And your man?"

"Why, I told you, Lisa, Golden Johnny," Sheila said, her face

was radiant, her face was a light, her mouth bubbled with bright words, all these of Johnny.

"Of course, dear. I forgot. Still, it's too pretty a name for any man," she said.

"You said it before, Lisa. I've Michael, too, you know," still smiling. "Some day you must come and see them both," she said.

Mrs. Bryant got up.

"Oh, don't go, don't go," Sheila said, not thinking of them, of Johnny or Michael, not thinking of anything except making this woman stay.

Old as old goes, and driven as wind, and lone as a star, as quiet as mice, and bent and spent, and as white as a bone, but could waken brightness in Sheila's breast.

"But I ought to go," Mrs. Bryant said.

"No, don't go, wait," Sheila said, and made her sit down again.

Absent-mindedly she picked up the empty cup, and at once Sheila filled it with tea, half filled her own cup. They leaned towards the fire and they drank the tea. Suddenly, and just as she had done in "The Star and Garter," Mrs. Bryant was mumbling again. Sheila listened, she sat quite still.

"Watch a queen come by," the old woman said, "oh, watch a queen come by, come down great marble steps, all fair and shining, and with bright buckles to her shoes, fine men walking beside her. Watch her tall and comely, feet stepping light as air, and a boy beside her holding a long train that was all full and silken. Watch her go by. Oh, I was like that when I was as you are now."

She stopped, as she had drained her glass she now drained her cup.

"One day he went away, that husband I had, away a month, then three, these grew to ten, and one night it happened. Yes, a fine boy it was. When I woke that next morning, why, I knew what was golden. I remember that."

Sheila heard rain, this fell in a lightning patter, stopped, then

came down-pouring, then suddenly she knew what time was, and what this day meant, she knew they were out, her Johnny and the child, now wondered and worried, asked herself where could they be.

"That day they came, one man and then another man, said he's fair fallen. I just looked at them and I said, 'Go away,' and they went away, right up to that pub called 'The Mermaid,' many a sailor behind the frosted windows, but not my man. A cruel thought came into my mind, I said, 'All right, toss away now and forever in what you never had enough of.' I shut that door, and I looked round the kitchen. I saw his old pipes in the rack, I took them out and I burnt them, watched them go down to ash, I picked up his old cap from the hook of the door and I put that away, and an old grey coat he'd wear when home and hard bound, I put that away, too, shut fast away in dresser and drawer and all the time my mind's wondering how fair he's fallen."

She stopped, gave a little laugh, said, "I wonder how he likes his old *Dernian* boat. I hope those men as hold the keys of the sea won't be pushing me away from window to window because I can't get no money for a man whose fallen, fair or foul. I'll come along at the same time Friday morning, dear," she said, "we'll go down together. Lord! Such mountains of money that grey pigeon of a little man plays with as he asks you the name of the ship your man's in, and how much you might want to help you stand up straight in the world."

"You won't have the last cup of tea in the pot," Sheila said. This was unheard.

"Soon's those men had gone away I said to myself why I could put on my coat and hat and go right up to that 'Mermaid' pub, and hear them all laughing there, the men from the sea, behind those windows, think of my man then. But I didn't. A day comes and a horn blows, but it means nothing to you. A day comes and a man comes into it and tells you of one who is fair fallen and these words get inside

you, grow there, and soon they are like great weighted things falling into the sea that has him."

Again she got up. "I'm going now, dear," she said. "You do make a lovely cup of tea."

"I'm glad you came home with me," Sheila said, "it must be lonely for you sometimes."

"Sometimes," Mrs. Bryant said.

Sheila went to the door with her, opened it, and there, fallen like a shadow across them both was Johnny, and in his arms Michael lay fast asleep.

"Oh, I *am* glad you got back out of this awful rain," Sheila said. "Why, you're both drenched through to the skin. And the baby. Let me take him. This is Mrs. Bryant, Johnny," she said, all in one breath, and then she moved aside and the man came in.

Mrs. Bryant stood down off the step and looked away towards the town.

"This is Mrs. Bryant, Johnny," Sheila said, but he was not there.

"Good morning, dear," the old woman said, and went off down the street.

"Good-bye, Lisa," Sheila said, then went in and shut the door after her.

She called "Johnny," and all the time he was sat in the chair which the old woman had left.

"Anything to eat, girl?" he said.

"Of course, of course, Johnny," waving her hands in the air. Then she saw he still had Michael in his arms.

"Where were you all the time, I was wondering where you were," Sheila said. "Where've you been, Johnny?"

He looked up at her, remained silent, got up from his chair. He lay the sleeping child down on the sofa, and went upstairs.

Where have you been, sailor?

CHAPTER XXII

WHERE have you been, sailor, where have you been carrying
that child?

Out through the back door and along the back entry
of these houses, where I bumped into three women, all
hair and shawls, then came out at the street's end. Not a
soul about as it was just about half-past eight, I went on down.
Crossed over by Caley's, the chemists, then on past Duthie's
shop, never stopped to look at anything, just went on walking,
crossed another road. Up a hill between two rows of small
houses, and all their doors closed, yet one time these would
all be open to the world, women talking and children laughing.
Went down a hill and from its top I saw many a mast sticking
up. That child is beginning to lie heavy on you, sailor, you
better turn back, it looks like rain. Not yet. Many a tall
mast can be seen from here. Keep on walking, sailor, remember
miracles sometimes happen. Remember that day on a green
ocean, oh so far back, how far, oh very far back, and all that
ringing of ship's bells and wild shouts and clapping and cheering
of men, that was miracle, sailor, that day a war was over and
done with, and a man's heart turned right over. A miracle
like that, sailor, never know your luck, it might happen.
Damn this drizzle. Keep on going towards where ships lie.
Get past that policeman. How he stares at you. Is it this
child on your shoulder, or is it your stride, trying to keep an
even keel on many a mile of stones. O.K., sailor, keep on
moving. And when you get to the very end of this place
where you're going to, then on again, just as though you
weren't going to any special place at all. Walking is good
for you.

Not a man going your way, yet on you go, on. One wide
circle round emptiness and then another. Where've you been,
sailor, why that's where you've been. "Are you all right,
lovey," I said to that kid, as though it might say, "Yes, dad,
I'm all right."

"Nice and warm, chuck," I said, thought it might smile.
"I oughtn't to have brought you out at all, Michael, my boy,
but your mum says, 'Go out, *out*, oh, go out anywhere, and take
him with you.' I took you out.

"Why'd she say that, lovey, why'd she shout it out, sharp,
like she'd a corn on her tongue.

"You fall asleep on my shoulder, laddie, you'll be all right.
Just going for a walk to see the ships, the nice, lovely ships,"
I said.

How soft his hand is against my horny one. How you like
feeling it, sailor. Walking is good for you, just keep on going.
Then I turned a corner. Walked bang into an old shipmate,
it was a sight to see. We shook hands then.

"Why, how are you, Grimes?" I said.

"Hello," he said. "Looks like a bit of rain coming along."

"Yes, it does."

"How's things," I said.

"What bloody things?" he said.

O.K. That's enough. Very few words about this morning.

"Which way are you going?" he said.

"This," pointing where ships lay.

"All rusting at quays," Grimes said.

"Even your spanking ship, shipmate," I said, laughing.

He looked away then. Maybe it got him on the raw.

"I agree," he said. "I was caught out that time, all right.
First time, though."

"Only *you* caught out," I said, feeling a bit jealous.

"Oh, every damn sailor who ever crossed his legs," he said.

"What's happening, then?"

"I told you, man. Nothing. Rust is the only thing working
these days."

"But what about . . ."

"Cod," he said, "all cod." Threw his hands in the air.

"They say many a ship's been sold."

"So they say."

"Many a one being broke up, too."

"In the devil's yard, yes, I agree," Grimes said.

"I say, shipmate, I hope you don't mind me saying it, but you look awful."

"Me!"

"You."

We were standing outside a pub, famous in the good days.
Doors shut and all quiet.

"Look here, Manion, I've just got fivepence. That'll get us a drink each. Let's hang round till they open."

I shook my head. "No thanks, shipmate. Besides, I'm going home. This kid worries me."

"By the way, how *is* your missus?"

"So, so. Well, so-long, Grimes," I said, "be seeing you some time, I hope."

"So-long, shipmate. Let's hope so," he said.

Rain fell heavier, I turned round and made for home.

Where've you been, sailor, why that's where you've been.
This room I'm in might be any ship's bridge, and I'm pacing it, and I'm thinking about where I've been.

"Johnny."

"Hello."

"Your breakfast's ready now. I wish you hadn't gone out without it this morning," Sheila called up to him.

"Keep it."

"It'll get cold."

"I don't want it I tell you."

"Oh, Johnny, do come down. I can't keep on shouting up to you."

"I'm coming down."

She was standing waiting for him when he came into the kitchen.

"Do have your breakfast, I've cooked you a lovely kipper. I was lucky this morning."

"Were you?" not looking at her. Christ, how can I look at anybody this day. God, sailor, here's her hands creeping up, her arms round you.

"Johnny, I know how you feel. I understand, really I do. I am sorry for you. It's a shame the way they go and lie all those ships up."

She's crying, sailor, she's crying.

"You're a good girl, Sheila, yes, you're fine. But all the same I don't want anything now. Honest, I don't. Besides, I'm going out."

"Out! Again?"

"Just for a walk."

"Another walk?"

"Another walk," I said.

"Where to?"

"Anywhere. See you later, girl. Stop crying, everything'll be all right soon, just you see. That fine time's coming, it says so in the song, and if you can't believe that, girl, then what's the use of believing anything. I shan't be long. I thought I might try and get a wink of sleep, I tried to, but nothing doing. Never slept a wink all last night. Ah, here I am talking again. Bye-bye now. I'll be back soon."

I put on my cap and went out again. She tapped on the window and I went back. "Yes?"

"I can see Mrs. Bryant coming down the road there," Sheila said. "Won't you stay, Johnny, she does so want to meet you. Her husband was a sailor once."

We were talking to each other across the front door step. "Once," I said. "Well, isn't that enough."

"She's such a nice old woman," Sheila said.

"Any other time but now, girl," I said. "So-long," and this time I meant it. walked quick out of that street, turned down an entry, came out on a main road, and in the end I was landed on that dock road again. Yes, sir, near where ships lie, near where all those masts stick up into the sky. Why, sailor? Because you still believe in miracles, that's why.

I went straight through the dock gate, right down the big, silent shed, and this time I knew where I was going. Right down to the jetty. It took me all my time to keep my eyes straight in front as I went down, right past that berth where my own *Eagle* lay, lay there this last ten and a half months, and only one man aboard her, her old skipper.

Skipper. Good as good goes, forty-two years sailing ships, and now he's only a watch-dog to this *Eagle*, keeping his eye on her for an invisible owner. Watch her, skipper, some Christ-forsaken sailor might slip in one dark night and pinch her right out of the water. Keep on looking right to front, I said to myself. Then I stopped. Coming towards me, almost as though he was going to speak, was that very man, coming fast down her gangway. He passed by, let on he didn't see me. I let on I didn't see him. Fair's fair, sailor.

At last I got where I wanted to be. Right on to that jetty. I sat down on an old bollard and I looked out to sea. A fine, clear day, but nothing in this sea. I heard the old graving-dock clock strike midday. Noon. Twelve o'clock. I'll go home. No I won't. Hang on. Nothing in this sea, your right hand's powerless, why hang on. A man passed me by carrying a fishing-line, is that a crab hanging out of his pocket. Oh, hell! I'm going. I can't sit here, no, she's good, and all the time good, I'll go home to her. Nothing here except a great flat sea. Away I went back up the same old shed, this time stopped, I had to peep, then creep along like any fool kid, take a look. There she is. Same old ship, same old *Eagle*. Clean decks, but she always had clean decks; tall masts, but always were tall, now quiet, and she never was quiet. *Eagle*, when the hell are you going to sail? When?

"What are you doing here?"

Who the devil's this? A policeman. A great big policeman. My! What a powerful feller he is. What am I doing here?

"Having a look at my old boat?" I said.

"Any particular reason?"

"Any particular reason for your bloody curiosity," I said. I hated this man.

"You're not supposed to be hanging round here at all, you know right well no ship sails, and won't for a long time."

"Her owners know better than I do."

"You better get along."

"I am going."

"Then go then," he said.

That's how it is. I went straight out of the dock and never stopped walking till I got home. All the way back I was hoping I'd meet up with a shipmate, but nothing doing. Expect I'll chance on Grimes some time to-morrow. We might go ship-hunting to-morrow. That's it. I'll plan it all out to-night. This *very* night. Why wait for a miracle, sailor, make it yourself. God, I was all excited, and when I got home I told my missus all about it. She was glad I was back. I could see that right away. "Hello, darling," I said. "I'm back. I wasn't long, just as I promised. Where's Michael?"

She wouldn't say at first, instead she said she wished I didn't go out so much, so early in the morning, so much walking. I laughed.

"Why, walking does you good, girl," I said, "but where's the nipper?"

"Look, Johnny," she said, "I'd an idea you wouldn't be out long this time, and now *do* have your breakfast, which I've kept hot in the oven for you."

"All right, girl, but where's the nipper?"

"Find him," she said, and started to lay out my breakfast.

It made me feel quite hungry. I knew where that kid was, so I got into my old slippers and went off upstairs. Half-way I stopped, just for the pleasure of listening to his babbling, always babbling away to himself that young Michael is. When I went in he was sitting up in his blue cot and still talking away.

"Hello there, hello darling," I said, dropped down the side of the cot and sat by him. "Well, how's the little man getting

along on this fine morning?" He can't talk a word yet, of course, but he can babble, he can laugh, he can smile all right, and that's something to hang on to, sailor.

"Come on down now, Johnny," she called.

"Coming."

He still has that lick of hair one side of his head, a little yellow flame of it. I bent down and kissed that kid, and I wondered what he'd be when he grew up, and I wondered if he'd be a sailor. I pulled up the side of his cot then went downstairs.

"Ah! That looks good," I said, and fell to it right away. She sat by me, even had a cup of tea with me. I knew she didn't want it, really, just done for company. Glancing up at her I saw that same old question framed on her fine young face, an old question, nine months, oh, nearly a year old. Why bother to answer a question as old as that.

I went on with my breakfast.

"If this rain would only stop," I said, "a man might go out and have a look round."

That did it. Yes, sir. She exploded, and that framed question went flying.

"Another walk! Oh, Christ!" she said, and it was the very first time I'd heard that girl swear.

That's how it is, sailor, that's just how it is.

"Oh, God. Don't talk to *me* about walking," I said.

I couldn't go on with my breakfast, I didn't want it, hated it, I hated myself. And then I caught tight hold of her. I hugged her close, warm as warm.

"Sheila, girl," I said, "I know how you're feeling, believe me I do. Don't say it. But something will come along, just you see. Some fine old ship rusting away at a quay, lying there big with shame, it'll break loose, it'll get free, it'll tear that bloody prisoning anchor up. It'll be away. All the fine ships in this port can't just go on rusting, just for a few men one never sees, never misses seeing, doesn't want to see."

I still believe in miracles, yes, sir. I couldn't help telling her

of that time I was high in the old *Eagle's* nest, and saw a miracle happen then. Before my very eyes a fine ship turning from grey to blue, and you knew a new time was coming, you knew all the mines were sunk, all the tin fish scuffled away, and all those torpedoes fired from tubes making great circles and finding nothing.

"Eleven and a half months, I know it's a long time, girl, believe me I know it only too well. When you came away with me to be a sailor's wife, you hadn't the measure of times like these. You couldn't have," and then I jumped to my feet, I struck that table with my fist, "and you shouldn't have, no, you *shouldn't* have," I said, all excited, all I'd been holding in came out. Let it come out, sailor, it's most of it black, let it flow away back to where it came from. Somewhere around hell.

"Come here, Sheila, girl, come over here."

There! That's better. That's over. These things happen, they can't be helped. A little tiff, what's a tiff, anyhow? Nothing.

"You'll see, something will turn up."

"I know it will," she said.

"All right. That's good. I'm glad you feel like that, too. Let's go out to the park this afternoon. We'll take Michael out as well. Shall we?"

"All right," she said, but so quiet it took me all my time to hear her say it.

All this time on your hands, sailor, you can't eat it, you better kill it.

CHAPTER XXIII

"HERE's a letter for you, Johnny."

"For *me*? Are you sure, girl? Good Lord! Nobody'd write to me unless something's happened to my uncle Ned in Australia and he's left me a fortune."

We both laughed over this bit.

"What a marvellous looking envelope," I said, "but you should have seen the fine piece of notepaper I pulled out of it, it crinkled just like a new pound note."

"Good heavens above! If somebody had told me the moon fell down last night, I couldn't have been more surprised."

"What on earth is it, Johnny?" She was clutching my coat sleeve.

"Why, it's from that company that owns the *Eagle*, and would you believe it, they write to tell me they owe me twelve shillings for overtime worked one night in Portland, Oregon; they regret the oversight, but I can collect it in the morning. After nearly a year. Fine accountants they must have."

"Twelve," Sheila said, "*twelve*. Why, that's grand, Johnny."

"To-morrow, that's Friday," I said. "I'll have to go to that other place. Half a minute. Let me look again. Aye! By God, they're business-like all right, just like they stopped that quid a month danger money the bloody minute those guns stopped firing. They say between half-past eleven and twelve. Can't be done. I must go to the other place."

Sheila is as quick as the devil in these matters, from a long apprenticeship.

"I know!" she said. "I'll go. I'll get it. You sign the note and I can draw it. That's it. I'll take the baby with me, it'll be a ride on the tram for him."

"That's settled then, you draw the twelve shillings. By God! It is a nice surprise, I must say."

"I *am* glad," Sheila said, and she meant it.

I'd been sitting in that kitchen for the best part of two hours. I'd had my usual early morning constitutional, just sat there looking into a fire; not thinking a thing, and then bang along came that postman.

"Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"Come here," she said.

Laughing right up into my face she said, "I hate your sitting about like this," and chiding me, "and don't think I'm shut-eyed, I know what you've been waiting for, Johnny. You'd like to step along to 'The Pitchpine' and see your friends."

She pressed a shilling into my hand, which I squeezed hard. "You're a marvel, girl. Thanks. I could just do with a wet."

Off I went to that pub, and found half a dozen men sitting there, Grimes, as usual, alone in a corner. No doubt about it but times have changed, it takes a sailor all of a morning to get rid of one glass of ale. Yes, there was my old shipmate, Grimes. I'd often passed by, and he'd be there, but I hated going in, always offering to treat you to a glass, which isn't any good unless you can treat a man back.

"Hello, there, Manion. And how's things?"

"Not *too* bad," I said. "Let's have a pint, Harry."

"You sound hopeful," he said.

"Pint, sir."

"Yes, a pint."

I joined Grimes then. We got talking about the usual sort of things.

"Been around this morning?"

"Have I been around?" I said. "I've covered the line of docks and before ten this morning, but I never saw anything I'd care to remember."

"I went down as far as Perry's," Grimes said, "see if I could pick up a man calling himself Billie Morley. But he wasn't there."

"Tough," I said. He did look a bit down in the mouth, unusual for Grimes.

"I heard a bit of a rumour about him," he said, "that if you care to put up five good pounds, and a round of drinks to his cronies, that man might magic you into a ship some fine morning. Can you believe it, get a hard bound man a boat."

I just laughed at that.

"Rubbish! There's not a ship moving."

"They say that."

"Hell's bells, man, I ought to know. I've been watching this line of docks for many a month. I'm not blind."

"Just the same I'm going along there in the morning," he said. "No use missing any chances. I've made up my mind anyhow. I'll take any God's own ship out of this port if only for the pleasure of saying good-bye to it. It must be worse for you, married and having a kid into the bargain."

"There's another coming along," I said.

"Another?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. I'm an optimist. Have a drink on me, will you. Last time I asked you to have one you turned up your nose at me. Time before that the same."

I waved my hand towards that barman, told him to bring two pints. "All right," I said, "it's a particular pleasure to me this morning to treat you to a pint."

"You know, Manion, I can't make it out sometimes. I mean all this stuff about golden eggs being laid one fine day, all this stuff about a fine time coming along. It gives you the pip."

"Here we are. Thanks, Harry. Now get that back, shipmate. By the way, will you be down at the madhouse same time in the morning?"

"Yes. Same time, shipmate. Round half-eleven. I aim to see this bastard Morley first, though, and I say that straight out because he is a bastard, and a bastard of bastards, expecting a sailor to hand over five pounds for a bloody job. Still, I'm a sensible man, I'll pay that five quid, I've a few quid put by, then once I've signed on this ship then I'll tell him straight what he is. Well, all the best, sailor. And the first to-day."

"Same to you, shipmate. I often wonder where that carpet-slipped sailor is these days."

"Who? D'you mean Jenkins?"

"Yes, Jenkins," I said.

"Probably doing the very same thing as that *Eagle* captain's doing. Acting as watch-dog to a dead ship, you can't figure it

out any other way, Manion. To hold a ship tied up for over nine months is murder. A ship's for sailing in, not for collecting all the stinking mud from a river bed."

"I'm with you there," I said. "Still, something will come along. Just you see. Don't laugh, shipmate, but that missus of mine believes in miracles, and so do I. And I tell you straight something'll turn up all right. Keep your heart up."

Holy smoke! Here's a man pulling on my arm, and all excited, standing on his two feet and saying, "You do, Manion, you really think things will begin to happen soon, I mean, a chance of a job. God, just to get out of this port, *just* to get out of the damned place," that hand shaking on my arm like he had a palsy or something.

"There's no need to go over the top about it," I said, laughing, and then he leaned over me, talking low in my ear.

"I never was a man much for boasting or anything like that, and I always aimed to get the measure of any distance ahead of me, and to sort of find out how things were going, and now I realise that that ship was no spanker, but just like all the rest of them. I thought we two might be striding decks when many another deck was just rusting away to nothing. Yes, sir, I was caught out, and so were you, because it was me who got you to sign in that *Eagle*. All the same my heart's O.K. It'll keep up a while longer, but not *much* longer. Give me a swinging beach any time, or even a French quay, which is about the lousiest thing you can be hard bound on, but anything except this town, which I hate. It's so mean-looking and so tidy-looking and so . . . ah . . ."

"I'm off," I said. "You won't forget then. Outside the green door around half-past eleven. And be on time, you know how it is. A mile of men lined up there."

We went slowly across the floor of "The Pitchpine," his hand was heavy on my shoulder.

"Suppose there should be two jobs going in one of Billie Morley's magic ships," he said, then laughing, "he might bring two jobs out of one hat."

"At five pounds a job," I said. "No, sir. Not even the special privilege of calling that man a bastard would make me take a job off him."

We stood talking on the kerbstone.

"You don't want to be too independent, Manion," Grimes said. "After all, there's just about twenty-one thousand six hundred sailors hard bound in this port."

"So-long," I said, I couldn't stand talking any longer after that.

What's the time, sailor? Half-past twelve. Hell's fire! Is that all it is? You'll have to kill some more time to-day. I went on home. Sheila wasn't there. She'd gone out with the kid as I learned from the note left pinned on the chimney-piece valance. Said my grub was hot in the oven, that she'd taken the kid out to the park and would be back in time for tea. Dinner in the oven, and tea when she gets back, and nothing to do between times. I feel like a millionaire.

I'd give her a gold medal any time for cooking. Then it was finished and I was sitting there, just looking around glancing at things. Saw my bag there, all white and scrubbed, she must have done it while I was up at "The Pitchpine." That's quick work. But there's nothing in this bag, not even a pair of socks. I wonder when it will be packed. I got up from the table and went upstairs. Sat on the bed for some time. Lit my pipe and stood looking out of the window. Got tired of that and came downstairs again. Just gone one o'clock. Any use going out again, sailor, for another walk. Down that line of docks again. How about it? That's how it is. Ah, well, better put your slippers on again, better get pacing that floor, it's not a very big deck, still, you can walk up and down, up and down and down and up, and around and around, walking is good for you. Off I started, hands in my pockets, away you go, sailor, keep your eyes well ahead, fixed tight on that horizon which is the dresser and the back-kitchen door, keep on going, and I did, pacing up and down, my head dizzy with the weight of ships and the names of ships and the horns of ships, went on

and came back again, then up the floor again. Walking is good for you. The door opened and Sheila came in. The kid was rosy-faced, but that girl looked on the pale side to me. Getting near her time, I was thinking, yes, getting near her time all right. What will you call this one, sailor?

"Johnny!"

"Hello, hello," I said, my arms out to take that kid off her.

"Don't," she said, "don't, I can't stand it, Johnny?"

"Stand what, girl?"

"Oh, God! Do sit down. Stop pacing, stop pacing." That's just how it is, sailor

CHAPTER XXIV

ON Fridays they come up from nowhere, and out from anywhere, and this grey, stretching plain is alive with twenty thousand six hundred men hard bound. Not all out and striding with the step that rang out on many a deck, but shuffling and skulking and drib and drab moving, and always moving. One long, undulating, pressing, and always weaving snake-line of grey men, moving, always moving towards a green door, green blaze to this grey. Stretching back and always back, and in and around and up and down, by street and road, and alley and lane, pressing and weaving and winding, and creeping and crawling over the plain.

"Move along there," the sunlight caught on his helmet. There was a man of medium height standing in this line, he wore a white scarf, his hands were dug deep in his pockets. He never moved, because he didn't have to, he was moved. And by him, and taller by inches, was another man, whose violent red hair could not be hidden by the great peak cap he wore. It forced its way out at the sides, starving the barbers. He scraped his feet, often spitting, in the absence of something to do, and when a powerful white dray horse hauling a lorry

laden with cotton bales came up this road, striking fire from the street stones, he looked hard at it and went on looking, because it was something to do. But he never looked ahead at the green building that heaved itself up into greyness of road and stood fast, often vibrating to its foundations when the enormous power of a train thundered past it. He kept on looking at the horse, exploding energy remorselessly against slippery stones. The line moved up, and they were moved with it, wound and they wound, held fast and they held fast, shuffled up an inch, and an inch they were shuffled up, and one man kept on spitting and watching the horse, and one stood still wherever he was pushed, until that line moved again, at first an unconscious jerk, and then grown into one long tremble, and waves of trembles reaching far back, as far as this line stretched, and nothing was normal from end to end, since the time which was their time was less than normal, and no man knew this better than he who watched an affrighted horse. The man with the white scarf was looking ahead, and around and about, but you could not tell what he was looking at, whether it were at this line's length, as long as hunger's lick, but he might have been looking at everything, yet seeing nothing, he was all eyes. A toe pressed stone behind him, and a heel anchored on hard ground, but no word was spoken by this red-haired man. A struggling horse has become the eighth wonder of the world.

"Keep moving, keep that line moving. Keep order there," the helmet in shadow now. "Keep moving, keep moving."

That line is moving again.

The Town Hall clock struck the half-hour. A thousand eyes looked up.

"They go out to lunch about one o'clock."

This green place has windows, large and bright, like enormous, feverish eyes, has doors mauled by powerless hands, has walls smeared with grease from a shoulder's vicious rub, and at wall's base where feet reach temporary asylum from the endless plain an isle of spit, and fallen and anchored in it the notice tha

proclaims that all Silence is Golden, pulled down by a hand powerful with rage, full loaded with the venom of ache and grind, and dancing, demented horizons, shipless and yet to be shipless, heavy with the threat of shiplessness.

The man with the white scarf moved from one foot to the other, because this was something to do under the great arch of silence, and stillness and nothing. But the man with the red hair cried, "Ah! . . ." when the horse fell, spat wide, then lost his place in the line when he ran out to help with getting it up again. Now he was gone all that line moved up one inch.

"Keep moving there, keep on moving. No talking inside." The helmet did not move but the line did.

A tousle-headed boy came along pulling a loaded cart behind him, its wheels already seeking the gutter's grip before that gradient came into view, sent water squelching, and some wind-driven paper splashing pavement.

"Why the devil don't you look where you're going, son," but the cart went on, his ears were stuffed with cotton-wool, he suffered from pains in the head.

"I say, Grimes," Manion said, "we're getting nearer."

"So I see, shipmate," Grimes said.

"Nearer and nearer."

"That's fine," Grimes said, he took off his cap and scratched his red hair.

"Were you out this morning?" he said.

"Me? Yes, I was out all right, along alone and around and back again."

"No luck?"

"No luck."

"H'm!"

"Keep moving, no talking when you get inside." The helmet caught sunlight again.

"Did you get down as far as Perry's?"

"Yes, just after half-eight, and the crawling little swine was gone off."

"Tough."

"Saved me five pounds, shipmate, but all the same, I still want to get out of this goddam port. I'll pay good money to get out. If I land up in the States then I'll anchor there, take ship there, or else try for a job on those Lake boats, they say a man's sitting royal if he meets up with a job on them, and the grub's O.K. Or maybe 'Frisco. . . ."

"'Frisco," the man in the white scarf said, "why, God Almighty, that's the loveliest place a man ever sailed out of."

"The chances here are that a man might sink down and away to nothing in time. You can be hard bound too long. Think of being rubbish, then square that up with getting a job for five pounds and a round of drinks to a bastard name of Morley. Think it over, shipmate."

"Hell's bells, can you believe it," the man with the white scarf said, "we're actually inside."

"So we are, and I can see that grinning cow over there."

"What grinning cow, Grimes?" Manion said.

"Him there behind that wire dodger stretched over the counter."

"Order there. No talking inside the green door. Keep moving, move along."

Keep moving, sailor.

"We'll be at that counter soon by the look of it," the red-haired man said.

"Aye! But keep cool, keep cool," Manion said, laughingly. He inched his way up, Grimes inched behind him.

"I say, hold my place while I slip round to see a man named Jones," Grimes said, and the man in the white scarf said, "O.K., but hurry up, don't be long."

Look where you will, there's the floor's slime, and that counter is creaking under the weight.

"No talking. Order there. Keep on moving."

"You got a green card yesterday."

"I know I did."

"What d'you want now?"

"A ship."

"Get out."

"Stop that shouting there. Will you keep on moving."

"Get out, what for? What the hell d'you think I am. I'm lined up for my bone like the rest of them. It's not the vacuum cleaner, it's me. I'm no good with women at all."

"Get out."

"What's all this row going on here," the helmet said, pushing forward.

"Next."

"Manion."

"One four three. Next."

"Hey there, Grimes, hurry man," the man in the white scarf said.

"Grimes."

"Grimes, one four three. Next."

"We've done it, shipmate."

"I said, *Next*."

"Crighton."

"Crighton. Can you use a brush and shovel?"

"I can use a brush and shovel."

"You're new to this place, could you find your way around the streets?"

"I could find my way by the stars," the captain said.

"Next."

"Grumbley."

"Nothing more coming to you. By the way, you'd suit a tall hat. Would you care to be a messenger in an insurance office. Yes, looking twice, I think you'd suit."

"In a top hat?"

"The job's good, the money sound."

"I'll try it."

"Green card. Next."

"Christ! Let's get out," the red-haired man said, his arms struck out into space, his hands pawed the air. "Come on, Manion," he said, "let's get out."

"Keep moving there."

"I say, Grimes, that line's getting longer than ever. How far does it go?"

"Back to the beginning of time. Let's move, shipmate. Shall we catch a tram?"

"Walking is good for you," the man in the white scarf said.

"Next."

"Any man here who can climb a chimney, chimney-sweep wanted. Don't crush."

"Walking away down past this line of hard bound men is like reviewing an army," Grimes said.

"I see that fellow Crighton jumped for the job this morning."

"Eight kids makes that a necessity," Grimes said.

"When's this line ending?" Manion said.

"Ah!" the red-haired man said, "that's a secret. I feel dry this morning."

They came by "The Dove," went in, and they called for two pints. They sat down and talked, they had to get something out of their system, and they went on talking, and drinking, and talking again, they had to get that line out of their system.

"Ah, it'd be a miracle all right if we were both away before next Friday. I hate that green place, shipmate."

"Don't talk, just drink," Manion said.

They finished their drinks and came out.

"There's that helmet going right down the line ahead of us," Grimes said.

"What about it?"

"Nothing."

"Then let's get on."

"Where?"

"Just walking," Manion said.

There was a white mist coming in over the river, falling low over the city, draping roofs, curling into streets, smearing windows. They went on and still they were passing this line.

"Looks as if it's going to be foggy, shipmate," Grimes said.

"Sounds like it, too," Manion said, hearing a fog-horn blow at that moment, a long, low, throaty, wavering sound. "Aye, that's fog all right."

They stood on a street corner. The red-haired man stuck his thumbs into his vest, he looked away towards the South.

"I'm going to hunt up that crawling swine again this afternoon," he said.

"You mean Perry?"

"That's who I mean. Oh, I say! There's Crighton, there's our skipper from the *Adventurer*. Hello, there, captain, how's it going?"

A tall thin man came out of a big gate carrying a brush and shovel, then vanished into another building hard by.

"That's how it's done, Manion," Grimes said. "Bloody fine for a sailorman, isn't it? After all they were shouting about us a hundred years back."

"Is it that long?" Manion asked.

"Not in actual clock time, just how a man feels it," the red-haired man said.

The man in the white scarf suddenly tugged his companion's arm. "Listen," he said, "I've got a plan."

"What kind of a plan?"

"Keep that line moving there, keep moving, keep in line," the helmet said. He was by these men, he was watching them standing on a street corner.

"Well, we can't stand here discussing it, can we? Let's slip over to 'The Hangman's.' "

"O.K."

This pub was empty, this pub was cold, it was somewhere in the Arctic Circle.

"Two half pints of mild, shipmate," Manion said.

"Here's the first to-day, Manion, my boy," the red-haired man said.

"Same to you."

"Spit it out," Grimes said.

"Right! Get up about half-past five, meet you at the corner

of Gray's Gate, say, about six sharp. Catch a green tram and be carried as far as that tram goes, then switch to another, get right back to where that line of docks start. Yesterday saw a ship tied up but she'd steam coming up. Two hatches off. Got a kick seeing that. Might be something in it. Your eyes can't be everywhere. That ship might be sailing, you never know. That's one. We'll try there first, then if nothing doing, we'll work slowly along and miss nothing. You better bring something to eat with you, this is going to be a full day. I aim to board every ship in this port. Every single ship. Follow me."

"I'm following you," Grimes said, "but remember it all depends how many gangways you can get up; always remember that there are such things as watchmen."

"Hasn't a ship got a hawser, mightn't a ship have a lighter alongside her, aren't there back ways into ships as well as front ones. I've thought it all out. Comb those docks through. You never know, Grimes, you never know."

"Then what?"

The man in the white scarf was getting excited, his hand was shaking.

"Why, we exhaust two extreme points of the compass. Finish up just below Gray's Gate again. But that's not all, Manion said, without knowing it the fingers of his right hand were drumming on the table, as though he were intent on beating this plan, all airy and uncertain, into some definite shape, "in the afternoon I'm tracking right back to where I began and intend calling at every shipping office. . . ."

The red-haired man listened, he didn't look at him, he only looked at the hand. "That's a mad hand," he thought, "that hand's gone mad." He wondered if it would ever stop drumming.

"Fire away," he said, "but remember shipping offices are stony ground. Believe me, shipmate, and I'm speaking from experience, it's far better to haul five pounds out of your sock and let this bastard buy you a job. They say it can be done."

"We're not all millionaires like you," Manion said, and they both laughed.

"But in the meantime," the red-haired man said, "what about that?"

"Well, after we finish with the docks we get a bite of grub. I'm for staying out the whole day. I've thought it all out. Say what you like, it's a plan, and I'm going to carry it out. Three days to come and I've been a year marching this port."

"Look out," Grimes said, "hell, man, you're shaking the very life out of this table, to say nothing of spilling my beer," but the man with the white scarf did not appear to hear him.

"And anyhow, what about the visit to the madhouse, you can't neglect that. Friday doesn't be long swinging round to you, shipmate, and you have to get that goddam money out of them."

"We nip along there after the bite of grub. Take another tram right down to where the offices start to rear up. Are you in on this. It might even beat your Morley bastard's idea of getting a job. Anyhow, I'm doing it," Manion said.

Their glasses were empty, they went outside, stared about, said nothing, they were suddenly like men robbed of all directions, which way shall my foot stride, which way shall my right arm move? They stood staring at the line, always lengthening, always moving, and the helmet watching.

"I hate that swine."

Grimes laughed. "Manion, that glass of beer must have set fire to you. How're you going to behave when you can order a decent drink over the counter like an upright man? You'll be dead drunk and useless."

"I say, there's that little chap Dunn back again, he's coming over to us."

"So he is."

"Hello there," the red-haired man said, "I thought you were off with a green card this morning?"

The little sailor looked up at the red-haired man.

"It was the same bloody sort of job as yesterday. Holy

smoke. You should have seen me stride up gravel paths with that infernal machine under my arm."

"Well?"

The little man only grinned, then walked away in the direction of the green building.

"You know I think that man Dunn is a bit off his rocker."

"Maybe so. But I'm off, yes, sir. I'm catching this tram coming down. O.K. for to-morrow, Manion, but if I'm not there, don't wait any longer than ten minutes. If I don't turn up you'll know Morley's brought a ship out of his hat."

"Righto! In the morning then. Six sharp, well, up to six-fifteen at Gray's Gate. So long, shipmate."

"So long," the red-haired man said, made a leap into the road and swung himself on to the fast-running tram. Manion stood and watched till it turned a corner.

"I'm going home."

Go home, sailor, what the hell are you standing here for, anyhow? If you watch that long line of men any longer you'll get quite dizzy.

"Yes, I'm going home. Sheila's waiting for me to come back. I know that. Ah, why did I land up in this man's port, anyhow? O.K. I'm moving."

He walked slowly back by the way he came, slowly and more slowly, so quite unconsciously his was the tempo of this long snake-like line.

"Keep moving there, keep moving. No talking when you get inside."

"That helmet's just like a phonograph," the man in the white scarf thought, "just like a phonograph. Ah, well, just wait till the morning, something might come out of my plan after all. We'll see. I hope I won't be sea-sick next time I sail," smiling to himself. "Yes, sir, I'll flatten that whole day right out to-morrow, every single minute of it. I still believe in miracles."

That line moved on.

"Keep moving there will you, move along there will you. No shouting, the helmet said, and that line was longer and

longer, and always it was moving. "No talking when you get inside. Move along there will you. Come along now, move, move," the helmet said, and that line was still moving.

Keep on moving sailor, keep moving, accelerate mercilessly. V

CHAPTER XXV

"THAT's her," Sheila said. "Yes, I'd know her old woman's knock any time."

"Morning, dear," Mrs. Bryant said, meeting the young woman's smile as she went into the house. She wore a long brown coat that reached her heels, but no hat, she preferred shawls in the winter-time they were much warmer.

"Do sit down, Mrs. Bryant . . . I mean Lisa," Sheila said, pushing forward a chair. "I won't keep you one minute."

"Thank you, dear."

She watched Mrs. Manion go towards the stairs, noticed all things tidy in the kitchen, and on the mantelpiece all ornaments of brass were shining. Sheila came down dressed for out of doors and Michael in her arms. Mrs. Bryant at once got up again.

"My! That blue does suit you, dear," she said. "Oh, what a pretty little boy."

"Isn't he pretty," Sheila said, thinking, "I hope Johnny'll get the note."

"The man of the house out?"

"Yes, he's out," Sheila said, and in her mind said, "Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, and walking, walking, walking." Are you ready now, Mrs. Bryant?"

She pinned the note for Johnny on the mantelpiece border. "I'll be back sharp at twelve o'clock. Do nothing, just wait till I get back."

They went out, Mrs. Bryant put her hand through the young woman's arm, they were like mother and daughter and like

aunt and niece, as close as that, they might have known each other for a thousand years.

"This awful fog again," Sheila said, as they reached the bottom of the street and stood waiting for the tram to come along.

"I heard that old horn blowing hours back," the old woman said. "You can't sleep much with a man away on an ocean. I keep thinking about if the food's all right, aboard that old ship *Intrepid*."

"I hope this tram won't be long."

"It won't be long, dear," Mrs. Bryant said, her eyes searching where no tram was.

"It's quite damp and chilly this morning," Sheila said.

"What a man gets to eat aboard a ship is very important indeed," the old woman said, and then, "There's a powerful lot of men about this morning."

"Yes, it's Friday to-day," Sheila said.

"Makes me think about that man."

The tram came along.

"On top or inside," said Sheila, but Mrs. Bryant mumbled something which she didn't understand. "I said on top or inside, dear," she said again.

"As you like, dear."

"Inside then," Sheila said, though she would really have liked to go on top, take a front seat, but this morning fog was thickening, you could not see anything. They found a seat, Sheila against the window, and at once the child was sat up and drawing patterns with his hands on the frosted windows. The tram was full, it staggered down one hill, dragged laboriously up another.

"Some day I'd like to meet your man," the old woman was saying, her brown glove was worn like her hand, this pressed always on the woman's arm.

"Oh, you will, soon."

"How long's he been hard bound?" Mrs. Bryant said.

"Just a year come this Saturday," Sheila said, and then child

and old woman and tram were gone, flashed out like light, she wasn't even thinking about them, but her mind was large with a letter she'd had from her own home. "We'll send you a bit of butter next week. I do wish you could get home for a little while and bring the baby with you, he must be a darling. We'll send the little shoes along with the butter. Oh, we do wish you could get home just for a little while."

The tram jerked, and she was holding Michael, this old woman's hand touching her arm, that tram crazily going down hill, these things were real.

"How these old trams shake about," Mrs. Bryant said, turning her head right round to look at the other passengers. It stopped and some people got off, two dock-gate men got on and took a seat just in front of them, they talked of tides coming in and out, their talk was alive with the perilous minutes between tides, though all the ships were imaginary, they were talking of possibilities, but no more than that. Tides came in and out but nothing else in an iron age.

Lights came on in the shops, one after the other, dazzling the child.

"How bright the shops look with their lights on, don't they," Sheila said.

The old woman did not answer. She was suddenly impatient, fidgety in her seat, as though she were waiting for something, and when that horn blew she was again quiet and settled. She had been waiting for it, had known the second it would blow.

"That old horn's just like a crying man," she said. "The little boy enjoys his rides on trams so I see." Her half-open mouth made the child stare as it turned its face away from the window.

"We're *nearly* there now," Sheila said, seeing the first tall building come into view.

The old woman was silent, that horn was blowing again, blowing in her mind. The tram stopped, more people got off. Noisily, the dock-gate men went, too.

"Two more stops," said Sheila, wrapping the child tighter,

holding it more closely, wiping the damp from its hands.

"I was dressing myself upstairs, not thinking a thing, not expecting anything, when the knock came, and there was the queerest-looking man you ever saw in all your born days. I was like you are now, youngish, and carrying the soft swell about me. It give me a bit of a shock."

"Name of Bryant, he said, quite snappy he was. I remember it well, and you've a man hard fast in a blue ocean?"

"I said yes, that's quite so. I didn't know whether to call him sir or not. That's right, I said, because my man was in the old *Roman* then, and she always sailed in blue seas, down those Mediterranean places."

"He's in this ship and she's sailing back to where she came from around the middle of May or perhaps earlier"—pausing—"or perhaps not," he said.

"That's so," I said.

"He *was* a queer-looking little man and he'd a lean line of mouth, the jaw hung, you'd think of a bird's crop, crow perhaps, but he wasn't a bird, of course."

"Who are you?" I said.

"Standing pertly then, and tremendous hands resting on little hips, staring away at me he was. 'My name is Scupper Jack,' he said."

"Scupper Jack," Sheila said. "Oh, Lord! I've heard him talked about by many a one, but I never knew he was real."

Mrs. Bryant sat up and looked closely at the young woman.

"Didn't you, dear? Neither did I. But he's as real as real. He's always been called Scupper Jack. I've often seen him lurking about in the tea-leaves in a cup of tea I've been having; many's the day I saw him. You'll see him one fine day, dear. He lives in a hole in a corner somewhere in one of those great big buildings down there where they hold all the keys of the sea in great safes, and maybe he's sitting there doing nothing, then one fine day the gentlemen down that way ring a bell, a tiny little bit of a bell, and out scuffles that little man, up and away from his hole, and goes along and gets his orders."

"His orders?"

"Yes, dear, and he unrolls a map twice as big as himself and on it is the name of every man hard bound, and if that man's a missus or children, then their names and their children's names, and where they live, he knows every street and road and corner and lane and hole and alley and then he starts off on his journeys, and if the sunlight is in this street, and he comes up it's gone quick, and if there's a little boy or a little girl and they're playing in any street and he's about, they stop doing what they were doing because it's gone cold and they run home to get warm. And if he likes he can walk right up any street and into any house where a sailor's woman lives, and say, 'Look out there,' and anything he touches, even if that's warm, is ice, and anything he sees, even the brightest and loveliest colour you ever saw turns grey. 'I'm Scupper Jack,' he says, 'Make way there,' and he treads cold into places and ice into places and leaden minutes by the handful thrown at you, a queer little man, indeed, and a thin line of mouth."

"Terminus," the conductor called, "Terminus."

Slowly they made their way along the tram, and every inch of the way out, as Mrs. Bryant doddered along in front of her she was saying, "The poor old woman, why the poor dear's mind's running off with her, you can tell what it is. Oh, yes, you can tell what it is all right."

And then they were standing on the pavement, and Michael was crying.

"Well, well, did ums," the old woman said, her bony finger touching petal softness, and that child went on crying. The tram rattled out of sight round a corner.

"I must be back home by twelve o'clock prompt," thought Sheila. "We'd better hurry along, Lisa," she said. "I've to get back by noon, my husband'll be waiting for me."

They moved off, crushing their way past shoppers.

"There goes that horn again," Mrs. Bryant said, her step slackening, she was uncertain of direction, there were many

people about, but you could not see more than twenty yards ahead of you.

"Every time I hear a horn, or see a ship, or a fine man swinging a white bag on to his shoulder, why, I'm thinking of my man, and I know you'll laugh, dear, but I think about if that man's getting enough to eat, some ships can be on the mean side. And every time I turn a corner I think I'll bump smack into him. Do you mind me talking, dear?"

"Oh, *do* be careful here, Lisa," Sheila said, "Oh, do be careful crossing this road," and in front of them the line of tall buildings tore up at the sky, yet tore down on them, and wintry-faced when they looked at them. "How high those buildings are," Sheila said. "I keep saying the same old thing each time I come down here," she thought.

She caught the old woman's hand and slowly they crossed the road. They were safe on the other side. The big clock above their heads showed just half-past ten. Mrs. Bryant stopped.

And there hard by them a pub called "The Goblin." Its door was wide open, barking at the world. Mrs. Bryant looked in, and in the same moment a barman looked out. He was busy serving a customer.

"Here she is again," he said, "every Friday and prompt, too. I can set my watch by her."

"Who?" the customer said.

"The Dreamer," the barman said.

He walked away up the counter and he put a half-glass of port on the table that stood by the door. He left it there, went away, he served another customer.

"Are you waiting for something, Lisa?" Sheila said, thinking of Johnny's twelve shillings already large and shining in her purse.

"Me, dear," Mrs. Bryant said, but no more, she saw that barman beckon, she moved towards the step. "I won't be a minute, dear," she said, left Sheila standing on the pavement. She went straight up to the table by the door and sat down. The barman was cheery. "Morning, mother, foggy to-day,"

receiving in return an ecstatic smile. He watched her fingering her glass.

"Sort of morning a body wants warming up," he said, then, catching sight of the woman and child outside the door, "is that a friend of yours outside?"

Mrs. Bryant sat up, turned round and looked. She beckoned Sheila in. "I thought you were behind me, dear," she said. "I always stop at 'The Goblin' for a glass."

She shepherded Sheila to the table and did not sit down until she saw she was comfortable.

"I don't want anything, really," Sheila said, "in fact, I never bother with it unless Johnny brings something in."

The barman came over. "Try just a tot of rum, ma'm, warm you up this morning."

The child clambered about her shoulder, entranced by all the shining bottles, and the riot of colour. "I wonder what Johnny'd think if he saw me here now," she thought. "D'you always come here, Mrs. Bryant?" she said.

"I do wish you'd just call me Lisa, dear," the old woman said. She watched the young woman sip her hot rum, almost suspiciously sipped, as though it might be poison. "An innocent young person," she thought.

The clock struck eleven. Sheila got up at once. "I must go now," she said.

"I'm coming, dear, I'm coming," and they were out again, standing momentarily bewildered by the slow-moving traffic, and over it, and threading its way everywhere the persistent, crying horn. "I wish it would stop," Sheila said.

"Well, that's what they call her round here, anyway," the barman said, satisfying the curiosity of another customer the moment the women had gone out.

"You know, Mrs. Manion, you once said you'd come round and see me where I live, but you never came," slightly reproachful she looked at Sheila.

"But I will," Sheila blurted out. "Here we are at last, thank goodness."

They passed through swing doors, caught in shafts of light, the marble desert struck echoes as they walked, the great chords of stone.

"I wonder," Sheila was saying to herself, then mumblingly, "I wonder which corridor, which is the one?" staring about.

The child, wild-eyed with wonder, yelled into the enormity of building.

"Ssh," Sheila said, as the cry echoed back to them from the heights.

"Excuse me," Sheila said.

"Yes," a liftman said.

"It's this," holding Mr. Manion's letter in her hand, "which room would it be?"

"Better get in, missus," the liftman said, jerking a dirty thumb towards the lift, handing her back the letter she had given him, "fifteenth floor, room six hundred and seventy, second corridor on the left as you get out." Pressing a switch, they zoomed silently, deliriously upwards.

"And you, missus," he said, looking at Mrs. Bryant who had automatically followed Sheila into the lift, at the same time slashing gates shut.

"Tell me a window where they won't wave me away," the old woman said.

"Wave you away, what for?"

Still soaring.

"They never say."

"What's the name of the ship then?" the liftman said.

"First it was the *Thespis*, then the *Aranian*, and then there was the *Truculent* and the *Intrepid*, and the old *Roman*. . . ."

"Oh, yes," smiling, "and very nice, too, granny," the liftman said.

Ultimate height and then he slashed lift-gates open.

"Which?" thought Sheila, "which one?" turning back towards the liftman, the letter dangling large in her hand, and the twelve shillings miles away, away miles somewhere, all

these doors, this marble, such heights. "Which corridor did you say?"

"Second on the left, ma'm, just there, see!" pointing, grinning, "you can't miss it," loudly laughing, "it's staring at you, look, there it is, ma'm," casually, easily, time had a smooth flow, order a cool touch, frenzy's invisible from here, to-morrow is no fake, not if you are running a lift, up and down miles, and up and up past green and blue and buff corridors, and warmth oozing, and soft lights on softer carpets, even the hum in your ear soft, "Second on the left, *can't* you see?"

Sheila said, "Oh, of course," stammering, "yes, I see, I'm sorry," confused, feeling the warmth, the fatal hum in contented regions, "I see," laughing, yet didn't see, lost, bewildered, all this, for twelve shillings? staring at everything and nothing. "What's that she's saying behind me?"

"D'you ever see Scupper Jack about here," the old woman said, looking down at the liftman, she was taller by two inches, "d'you ever see that man?"

"No! But if I do, I'll certainly remember you to him," the liftman said, hearing a bell ring in the abyssmal depths, his finger touching a button again, touching order, the mathematical horror of perfection, and all the things that ran smoothly, the frenzy far off. Zooming down, down, like silk or velvet, so touching ground floor noiselessly, slashing gates back again.

"Morning, sir," seeing an advancing top-hat.

"Morning, here's a paper for you," the top-hat said, open at, "To-day Consols are steady but the immoral Franc is . . ." "Thank you, sir," the liftman said, his finger on the button again, pressing, they zoomed, a soft purr, then gates slashed back again. "Good morning, sir." . . . Good God! There's those two women just wandering about like a pair of . . . shutting gates, going down again, rustling the newspaper, "What's this, 'To-day's Consols show . . .' aw! . . . hello, 'Baton charge outside Grays Gate Dock,' . . . um! sounds a bit lively to me, by Christ! Just fancy that!" reaching abyss again.

"Morning, missy."

"Morning. Fifteenth floor, please."

"Yes, miss."

"Thank you."

"Morning. I say, where the devil are you two people wandering to, eh?" laughing again, "Oh, I said, *second on the left*, didn't I? What d'you want, grandmother, what is it, who are you looking for (who the hell is she looking for). Ah! I finish at six, anyhow," zooming down again.

"Excuse me, please," Sheila said.

"At the end of corridor five, room eight hundred and one, just ring the bell," an office boy said, he went off picking his nose.

"I wish I'd come here by myself," she thought, hearing the old woman dragging behind her.

"I'm going down now, dear," Mrs. Bryant said. "I'm going down to the ground floor where they pay out the allotment notes."

"This is it," Sheila muttered to herself, "this must be the place, room eight hundred and one," advancing on the door, her hand reflected in the darkly shining mahogany.

"Come in."

A man was sitting behind a large desk and a girl was taking down shorthand notes.

"Good morning," Sheila said, and handed him the letter, which he squinted at for a split second, then handed back to her, waving it, "Any of the pay windows on the ground floor. Now, Miss Evans, 'Owing to the insecurity of the present situation we have found ourselves inevitably compelled . . .'" The door closed but he never noticed it. Sheila was out in the corridor again, crushing the letter in her hand. This was dreamland.

A megaphone voice calling down to her, the liftman standing by his lift, rubbing his hands together, the attitude anticipatory and condescending, she walked slowly towards him. She noticed

the worn heels of his boots, the thin grey hair pomaded flat, the lean look that beamed confidence.

"D'you find the place all right?"

He looked at the child, fallen asleep in her arms, the warmth was like being drugged.

"No! They said go to the ground floor, any of the windows down there would pay out."

"Which means I must take you down again, I suppose," slightly carping, scraping a foot on the marble sea.

"I expect so," she said, utterly indifferent, "I expect you will." They purred down to the abyss and she got out.

"Now haven't you been told time and time again, lady, not to come to this window or any window on a Friday morning. It's no help to you, none at all to us," the man with the pince-nez said, his face pressed up against the grille.

"Why, there she is," exclaimed Sheila aloud. "There she is," called softly, "Mrs. Bryant, Mrs. Bryant."

"Do go away, woman," the man said, "can't you see you're holding other people up?" and in a mysterious coded whisper to his assistant, "That fool doorkeeper again, give him X.Y.Z., will you. Send him here."

He called, "Next please, Name?"

Mrs. Bryant went on smiling in through the grille.

"I thought you'd gone," the man said, sucking his teeth loudly.

"Come away, Mrs. Bryant," Sheila said. "Oh, do come away."

She handed in her letter to the man.

"Twelve shillings," he said, the coins rang out on rich brass. "Is she with *you*?"

"Yes."

"Then take her home," and under the breath, "who lets her out on Fridays?"

But Sheila was gone off down the corridor, Mrs. Bryant trailing after her. "It was no use, dear, they simply wouldn't believe me."

"I must get back," thought Sheila. "I must get back. He'll be waiting for me. Are you asleep, darling?"

"I must get along now," she said to the old woman, decisively, anxious to sit in a tram to relieve this weight on her arm.

"Are you coming, Mrs. Bryant?"

"I do wish you'd call me Lisa," Mrs. Bryant said. "They said I oughtn't to come down here at all, as if they knew everything."

Sheila said nothing.

"They say I'm a nuisance, they say it's silly coming down to any of those windows when a man's ship is off the Register. They say . . ."

"Do come along, Mrs. Bryant," Sheila said. She put her hand through the old woman's arm. "I mustn't let her come down here again, I must come down by myself any other time it's necessary to come here. Why, there's half-past eleven striking now, oh, dear, he'll be waiting, he's no good of a man at cooking a thing," pulling at the old woman.

A momentary hold-up at the exit doors, and they were out in the street again.

The horns on the river were still blowing, fog was thicker, more and more lights came on. A big car purred up and stopped outside the doors, and a chauffeur with shining leggings stepped out and opened the car door. A large, soft, pink-faced, coated and belted man got out. He did not look at anything except the door in front of him.

"Twelve o'clock, Hughes."

"Yes, sir, very good, sir," and the car purred away again.

"He looks very important," Sheila said. "Why, here's another one coming up, and another behind it," watching two more cars draw up. "That's the third man with a tall hat I've seen this morning," she said.

"When you see those gentlemen coming down and going into that building, dear, then they say that things are going to happen. . . ."

"What things?" staring up at the big clock showing twenty-five minutes to noon.

"Things to do with the sea, dear, and with all the ships on them. I've seen them many a time."

"Oh! . . . I see!" still looking at the clock, thinking of trams, thinking of Johnny waiting. "Look! Here comes another one," she said. "I'm going, Mrs. Bryant, I'm going now, it's nearly twelve o'clock now," she said.

"All right, dear."

They crossed over the road, moving with three men who were going that way, the fog was all the time thickening, it pressed down over the whole city.

"There's our tram," Sheila said.

She help the old woman on. She pressed the twelve shillings tightly in her pocket. At the first stop it made, the old woman got up.

"I'm going now, dear," she said.

"All right," Sheila said. "Good-bye now," not thinking of anything excepting getting home by noon, not looking out of the window and noticing Mrs. Bryant go into a pub called "The Goblin" again.

"I must go down by myself in future. I wonder if Johnny got his money all right. I wonder if anything's happened. Oh, I do wish he could get a ship, it makes me ache just looking at him pacing and pacing and pacing. . . ."

"Fares, please."

Pacing and pacing and pacing, and walking and walking and walking, her mind racing with words. The tram went on.

CHAPTER XXVI

SING a song, sailor, sing a song.

But he sang nothing.

"He's waking up," Donnelly said, "he's waking up."

He watched Manion's eyes opening, the lids tremulous under

the white pressure.

"Where am I?"

"You're safe, shipmate," Donnelly said, turned as the door opened and the doctor came in.

"He's come round, sir," he whispered in the doctor's ear.

"Good. Oh, that's good," and he went and sat down on the chair by the bed. And everywhere that Manion looked was white, and quiet, and cool. This was safe. A spoonful of brandy passed painfully down his throat. And the doctor sat and watched, but said nothing. He just went on looking. "Yes," he thought, "he's come round, he's no longer *there*, he's come round." Donnelly stood silent behind him, and he too, was looking at Manion. Where have you come from, sailor, from where have you come?

Came on the back of ten thousand waves, sometimes with the sun and sometimes without the sun. Counted every one of them, ten thousand and more. Knew every move of them, could get the feel of one coming before I saw it, got the shape and size and colour of every one of ten thousand, and spun on them and tossed on them, and circled dizzily on them. From one that had the shock of granite in it I slid down imperceptibly to a calm, the unbelievable calm, flowed along like silk, you couldn't believe it, that between the opening and shutting of an eye you would fall swiftly down upon mountainous country, and those mountains were waves, and the sky a blue colour torn into ribbons by them, they were so high, struck up out of an ocean like rocks, had the look of ice and iron, yet all was water. And there they were ahead, lined up and confronting, and in and around them the wind slashed, yet not a move from a single wave, were these waves frozen, not a move, lined up, line on line of them, and passing through your brain got dizzy with counting them and your eyes tired with staring at their hard colour. Always moving, always being cut by them, I came through that country. Then the hours piled up and they became mountains, and they were greater than any mountains in any country. Hours and wind.

Wind?

I saw wind, believe it or not, I saw wind. Saw it curl and sweep and spread about, roll up, broaden out again, whistling itself into millions of shapes, but the only shape I remember was a snake-like one, and that movement was a mad movement, wriggling away, away somewhere so far you couldn't follow it, and then you lost it, it had fallen away somewhere over the edge of the world. Came through that windy country.

Here is rain, and here a colour half brown and half grey, and they were merging together. But this sea did not toss and curl up and smash and shatter its weight about, it just gently heaved and went backwards and forwards, like it was the only kind of movement it had ever made. Passed through this and again a calm. A light coming down on you that was soft, the sun thin somewhere behind a great white puff of cloud. If I could have leapt I would have leapt right up to where it was, warmed my hands at it, that time was cold. And again the calm. Befuddling calm, mind-teasing, but all the same merciful, flowed along, along, and the only fear is you might melt away into all this calmness, keep your eyes fish open, it is wise. Keep them wide, wide open in this calm, somewhere around and about there is a great suck that could get you, you wouldn't know, softer than silk, more silent than space is, I had to watch that calm. And all the time I was counting, counted one million in fives to keep my eyes open, watch for that soft suck that might get me, and I wetted my head many a time, and went on wetting it. Calm without a stir, without a sign, clueless, no directions anywhere, a calm like nothing and nothing and the space between it. Fallen flat and lying there, not moving yet knowing you were moved, through this calm water, under that dizzying sky. Moving where, sailor? From one thing to another thing? From an old time to a new time? Just moving from nothing to nothing. Then suddenly, and not expecting it, something tearing wild, like a big knife through water, a great fish. Something moving, alive, flesh. Shout, sailor, shout. Shout and let it move away from you,

anywhere away from you, into heights or depths or over plains. In the morning you will hear a cry and that is your cry come back to you from great distances, emptiness encircle emptiness. So on and then on, and counting every wave. That's where I came from.

"You can sit by him," the doctor said, getting up from the chair, and Donnelly followed him across to the door.

"Yes?" the doctor said, scenting a question.

"D'you think he'll come round, sir?" Donnelly said, and with a sudden burst, "I'd hate to see that sailor go . . . now, sir."

"He'll come round, but don't talk, not yet anyhow," and the doctor went out. Donnelly took his seat by the bed. He saw the man's eyes wide open, but not a muscle moving, not a breath stirring.

"Still lashed and bound," he said, "all that time lashed and bound. All the time you were dreaming, and singing that crazy song, sailor."

Suddenly Manion was looking straight at him. He couldn't hold back, he spoke. "How're you feeling shipmate?" he said, "how are you feeling now?"

"Where am I?" Manion said.

"You're O.K. now," Donnelly said, "you're safe, but don't move, don't talk."

"What's all this?" Manion said.

"Don't move, shipmate, and don't talk. I tell you we're safe," Donnelly said, "and what's more we'll be home in a day or two. They said we would, they know, and that's a fine thing to think about."

"I can't move my legs."

"I know you can't. But you will soon," and in a whisper and smiling at him, "I'll say this, shipmate, you can certainly talk."

"Talk?" gasping.

"No, no, don't you talk." Donnelly said, he was a little frightened then. But Manion kept his eyes on him, it was like

a key turning and opening your mouth, you couldn't be dumb against a look like that.

" You'll be fine soon," he said.

Manion said nothing, just went on staring.

So the silence dragged words from Donnelly's tongue.

" You'll be home soon, safe, back to that missus you were telling us about."

He put his big hand on the man's grey head, and stroked back the thinning hair.

" Talk, say something," Manion said.

Donnelly looked away through the port-hole, and suddenly, whilst he was looking, he was gone out of the cabin, he was on the raft again.

" Talk," Manion said.

" Well, d'you know who I am?" Donnelly said.

" Who are you?"

" My name's Donnelly. You see, Hughes and you and me and Tranter were down below and then it happened, you got such a nasty clout, but we managed to get you up all right, a bit bloody at the time, we bound you fast, then we flung you into the sea, we swam, then we got you on to the raft, then we all got on it, and one after another we took turns at lying on you, it was that windy and rough. And then you started, shipmate, talking, talk about spinning yarns. Such talk, sailor, bits and ends of things, names, old ships, old times, old wars, worn-out stuff, grey times, but it don't mean anything, sailor, it don't mean anything to us. Rubbish, old, done with, over, finished. That was an old war you gabbled about, and this is a brand new war, that war was twenty-five years ago, shipmate, but this is different, and not a grey day in it. No sir. Every day as hard and bright as steel, a bit too hard, a bit too bright, you like it soft sometimes, but not that old softness you gabbled about. Yes, shipmate, this is a brand new one we're in, and a brand new time. Rock, granite, iron steel, bone, anything like that, shipmate, but all that gabbling of yours, just overflow from an old scupper. Don't mean anything any more. No more

dumb sailors, and not so much shouting."

He was looking out through the port-hole again. The doctor came in and Donnelly at once got up. He took the vacated seat. The sailor looked up at the doctor.

"How are you feeling, Manion?" he asked, his hard brown hand resting against virgin white of bedsheets, and then his fingers were gently pulling at this. "How are you feeling now?"

"I'm getting better," Manion said. "Could I have a drink?"

"You're coming along fine," the doctor said. "Get him some water," he said, turning to Donnelly.

The man poured out half a glass from the carafe.

"Thank you."

Fuss a bit, slobber a bit, shipmate, but you're coming along O.K. And Donnelly was looking down into the sailor's face, but Manion stared at deck-head.

"Counting those rivets again," Donnelly thought.

"I'll just take your temperature," the doctor said.

"Shall I go out?" Donnelly asked.

"No, stay here."

He carried the thermometer over to the light. "H'm!" he said, "h'm. All right, Donnelly, it's all right," giving a little laugh, then emphatic, "It *is* all right, your sailor's coming along fine."

"I'm glad, sir, very glad about that."

With a quick nod of the head the doctor went out again.

And again the door opened ever so slightly and another man peered in.

"Here's Hughesy," Donnelly said, but Manion heard nothing.

"How is he?" Hughes asked, coming further into the cabin.

"How is he?"

"Ssh!"

"O.K.," Hughes whispered.

"He's getting better. You can't believe it, it's damn hard to believe anything, but he *is* getting better. The doctor swears he will."

"Ah! That's good, isn't it," Hughes said.

He stood in the middle of the cabin, not moving, not looking at anything in particular, and not thinking anything in particular, he was just very still, as though all this whiteness and coolness and quietness demanded it.

"Sit down, man," Donnelly said, "sit down. Here, over here."

They sat on the settee together.

"If I was that man," Hughes said, "I wouldn't sail again any more."

"Oh! Why not, shipmate?"

"Dunno. I just wouldn't sail again if I were him, that's all."

"You go and sit down by his bed there, just see if he recognises you. I'll go out. I have to go out for a minute anyhow. Go and sit down by him."

"Righto," Hughes said, he went and sat down by Manion's bed. Manion was looking at him, steadily, without a blink.

"Who're you?"

"Me? I'm Hughesy. You remember me, don't you? Red-haired, Welsh, just like that Mr. Grimes of yours. I've got red hair. Remember the way you used to pull it whenever the cry 'Show a leg went.'" Smiling, his big, loose mouth was full of laughs, but he held back, he was trying to remember something funny about Manion, but it wouldn't come, and the laughs remained locked up. "Hughesy, that's me. Red-haired like Grimes was."

"Grimes? Was?"

"Holy smoke. Harry Hughes, I was trimming to you on that last watch when she got it. I'm twenty, youngest of the bunch, you remember me all right, you're kidding." Then suddenly silent, staring down at the sailor. "He's over fifty, nearer to sixty, as grey as grey goes, an old-timer Manion is."

"Yes, I'm Hughes all right, but you wouldn't remember me lying on top of you, keeping the wind off, it was the only thing a man could do, and we kept it off, too, shipmate. One day when we're all home again, hard bound as you old-timers

say, well, one morning they'll tell you how I was suddenly so tired, I screamed and nearly dragged you after me into the sea. But always that man Tranter was wide awake, you'd wonder how he kept it up, but he did."

"Screamed?"

"Yes."

Donnelly came in again. He motioned to Hughes to get up. He talked low in his ear.

"Tranter's coming in," he said. "He wants to see how he's getting on. So I thought we'd just wait till he came in and then skip."

"Tranter?"

"Yes, of course," whispering, "good Lord, you remember your own engineer, don't you. Here he is now."

"Why yes, that's right. Tranter. On watch with us at the time. Of course. I must be balmy, shipmate," and then the held-in laughs flooded out.

"Ssh! Ssh, man," Donnelly whispered fiercely, clapped his hand over Hughes' mouth.

The door had silently opened. Tranter was looking in at them.

"I couldn't help it, Donnelly," Hughes said, "I couldn't help it," apologetic, and then he, too, saw Tranter looking in at him.

He was smiling at them both.

"Oh, it's you, sir," Donnelly said, "it's all right." He rushed across and pulled wide the door.

They stood aside as the engineer came in.

"I'm in the next cabin to this, sir," Donnelly said under his breath, "and if there's anything to do, anything at all wanted, just tap, sir," and somewhat confusedly, "and when you're ready to go out, sir, just tap will you? The doctor told me to sit with him for this morning. He says he's getting all right, but very slowly."

"Very well, Donnelly," Tranter said, watched them tip-toe out, awkwardly, clumsily, then he shut the door and went over

to where the sailor was lying. He saw him wide-eyed and staring, saw him still bound, ashen in the face, he saw him on the raft again. He sat down. As he did so, Manion closed his eyes. Tranter remained quite still.

This man was old, old enough to be his own father, this lean figure, those bound arms and legs, the hard black lines drawn underneath the closed eyes, a face that stared up at him like a map. Suddenly the sailor spoke, jerkily, but his eyes remained closed.

"Will we be home soon?"

"Yes, we'll be home soon," Tranter said, the shock of surprise in his answer, the voice speaking so low, so suddenly, had made him jump, he hadn't expected it, not so soon.

"Yes, we'll be home soon," he thought, thinking hard about it, feeling it deep down inside him as he looked at Manion, picturing it, calling it a miracle, nothing less than that. All four of them alive, and Manion alive. Almost imperceptibly he touched the man's hand, feeling the thin fingers trying to grip his own, pressing them into the palm of his hand, even these fingers were alive, his mind for a moment encircling raft again.

"We're alive, Manion," he said, "we're alive."

He couldn't help it, couldn't hold it back, it had to be said, it burst free from him at last.

The man's fingers slipped from his grasp, fell heavily against the side of the bed, and before Tranter had quite realised it, the eyes were wide open again and Manion was looking across at him. And Tranter looked back, and went on looking, because he knew now that this was miracle.

"How are you, Manion?" he said.

"I'm getting better," he said, "the doctor says I'm getting better."

"That's good, that splendid, really splendid," his wandering fingers at last clutched Manion's, he gripped them hard. "I'm so glad," he said. "You know who you're looking at?" he said.

"I've been dreaming," the sailor said.

"Have you? What were your dreaming?" leaning over him.
What were you dreaming, sailor?

Washed along, flowed, dragged, crawled, all the way back over ten thousand waves, back through the iron country and the frozen country and the windy country, and in and out weaved through mountains that were made of water, the calm again, and the enormous suck again, and the hours higher than any mountain you ever saw, shock up and higher again, how high will they go? Through all that ocean I came over, back again, all the way back again, pull this way, pull that, a sea will pull the way it means to. And suddenly no wind and no stirring, no colour, and nothing moving, not even this raft, and no light, a dark country. Darker than dark is. And rain. Great hurling streams of rain, fell like that, first a little rain like dust, so sly you wouldn't notice it, then a mad patter, then two and three, and suddenly showers, and showers and showers and showers again, it fell like that.

This raft fell, was always falling, lower and lower, down, down, and down again, and dark as dark, and darker again, and darker than that, and this raft's falling, still falling, further to go down, further to go, and more darkness to come. Nothing in all this, nothing in the whole wide world, nothing. Not a breath, not a move, nothing from anywhere, nothing to do but fall. Where to, sailor? Oh, where am I falling to, falling where? Still falling, and then I thought, "Cry! Make sound, shout, cry a name, oh, any name at all, but cry, make a sound and break it all, all this dumbness and darkness and nothing." I cried out, "Christ!" and the sound muffled up at once and muffled away. I couldn't hear that cry go forth, couldn't hear it go anywhere.

My leg's turning to water, my arm, feel them turning, they'll become part of this sea. My brain's water, feel it water. washing to and fro. And then I stopped falling, it was light again, I was out of this dark country, I was far down somewhere. I looked up, and I saw it, the great wall of sea, all shining green, dazzling in the light, looking all the way up this

wall, and right at the top, at the very tip, right on the edge of it, a little bird, no bigger than my thumb, my little finger. It was singing, singing mad out of its throat, and there it was, right at the very top. I kept on looking at it, high away it was, and the sounds it made poured down like waterfalls, out of that little mouth the flood of sounds poured down that wall of sea. I could hear them coming down.

My leg's melting, my arm is, it'll become water, become sea, I can feel it becoming sea. I listened, I looked up. Then there was nothing, no sound, it wasn't singing, it wasn't there, it was gone. Looked all that way up, right to the tip of a dizzying wall and it was gone. A bird no bigger than my thumb. It was then that I began to rise, came up and up and I was on another sea, waveless, not a ripple, no wind, and the raft moved and went on moving. This sea was bright, and this sea stank.

Where are you, sailor, going where, where are you going? I came by that suck again, knew it was there, I was afraid of a powerful silent suck, afraid of being sucked down into this brightness that stank. The raft crawled, I was still on it, and I could hear it crawl and I could see it crawl, I lay flat and I said nothing and did nothing and I thought nothing because my leg and arm were water and my brain was in this sea, sea-washed.

I counted another million in fives, another million, and when I finished counting, all those mountains were flat, and stretching so far away I wondered where their tips could be found. The hours that stood like mountains fell and stretched away where? I turned over on my back and I looked up and I saw nothing. I came through that sea, all the time looking upwards and there was nothing, not even a sky. My leg's turned to water, I can't stand, my hand, I can't clutch, my brain, I can't count, but I can hear something, that suck, hear that suck sucking away under me, watch it, watch that sly suck. I looked down and I watched a mile of sea flow past me, my eyes close to it, saw it all go by, I passed out of it, into another, a greater ocean,

the ocean of a million waves, and then I saw them. One and then another, and again another, a thousand and ten thousand. A million waves and a million rafts on them, and on each raft there was a man. I could see them, huddled each one, silent, not a sound coming up or over, not a stir, each raft kept to its wave top, bobbed and tossed and spun as a rafts do caught tight in the life of a wave. And all were moving. I watched them, I counted them I knew what a thousand was, a hundred thousand, I a been full close to numbers, held on so hard to them as I counted they were almost warm and alive, so this was easy, counting them all, as they moved over the breadth of ocean towards the horizon of iron. I looked farther than the farthest one, and that's how I saw this horizon line, the line of iron. Saw it through a mist, not haze or any kind of fog, not any cloud or smoke puff, a mist and then I saw where these rafts were going, and I knew where they were taking these men. I called out to them but heard nothing, I shouted again and again, "Hello! Hey there, sailor, hey you and you," but deaf or dead I heard nothing. Not a word, not a sound, moving soundlessly towards that horizon line. Nearer and nearer. It glinted, it shone and yet there was no sun about, it threw off a hardness, and yet there are no rocks lying about this ocean, it threw off a tang as of ice-breath and yet there were no bergs nowhere on this wide ocean. That horizon line was like a high wall of iron, yet each raft passed over it, rose, then tossed, fell silently over. So I came to it, and as I passed over it I thought of wind rising and a quick shudder of sail, going up on each raft, a million sails, all flying, and all this space smothered by sail. I passed up and over this horizon line and I tried to look back over all that distance I'd travelled, but there was a stiffness in my neck, I couldn't turn it, I couldn't look back, nor they, not one look back, and I moved on and all these rafts moved on, yet nothing on them moved, though these were men. In one great huddled mass moved, moved without mercy, towards where they were going, harbour or haven or lock or basin, moving and always moving, as sure as this ocean moved behind

them. I tried to stand but fell, to clutch but staggered, I cried aloud, "Which way do you go, sailor, which way do you go?" Not a sound, not a word, nothing you can listen to or wait for, nothing, and then I knew they were just moving over and I moved with them, and we were over that line and we were in the age of iron. I never stopped moving, moved as this ocean moved.

"Do you know who I am?" Tranter said.

"Who're you?" Manion said.

"I'm Tranter, remember me, don't you? I remember you all right. Remember how good you were on that awkward shafting job," leaning over further, his face very close to that of the sailor, thinking of the doctor, of the raft, of being picked up, of all that had happened, of getting home, of sailing again, and thinking of lying pressed close to this man, water-washed, pressing him down, and his face flat on the bared arm, and the little tattooed lady staring up at him through a dirty grey film of wavering hairs. Seeing her as large as life, and all the colours she had were bright colours, filling his brain with lights and music and dancing. Pressing for hours, then days, but always pressing to keep the wind out, keep death out and warmth in. "You remember that, don't you, Manion," he said, sitting up suddenly, his fingers again feeling for the sailor's, and they clutched, and then he knew it was miracle, this man was alive. You couldn't hold it back any more. It had to come out. "We're alive, Manion, all of us, Donnelly and Hughes and you and me," and he looked down again at the man's face, but the eyes in it stared at everything and at nothing, but never looked his way.

He rose silently to his feet when the door opened and the doctor came in. He couldn't speak, he didn't want to, he wanted to go out quietly, go back to his room, to sit down and think it all out, all over again, from the beginning to the end, the doctor might laugh, anybody might, but seeing that sailor alive was a miracle.

"Well, Tranter," the doctor said, speaking in a low voice,

how are you feeling yourself. You're looking much better, I'm glad to say."

Tranter was staring at him. And then he blurted out, "I feel fine, thank you, doctor, I feel fine," made a rush for the door and went out.

"And how's the sailor?" the doctor said, seating himself by the bed.

The smile came slowly, shyly, tremblingly over Manion's face, slowly as though it were covering the distance of a hundred years. "I feel a bit better now," he said.

"That's good," casual, thinking of the thermometer, his professional cloak on, thinking only of temperatures. "Let's see," he said.

He got up and went over to look through the port-hole. He saw a bright blue sea, and away to starboard the shadow of the land, landfall soon. The sun coming out, a gull wheeling high and making raucous noises as it soared and swooped, the smooth, even, rhythmic wash of the sea. He came back to the bed and took the thermometer from the sailor's mouth. Against the light he studied it.

"H'm. You'll do, yes, you'll do," under his breath, and then he sat down again. "You'll be landed safe home in two days, Manion," he said.

"Will I?"

"Yes. Try and sleep now," the doctor said.

He drew the curtain across the port-hole and the room was darkened.

"Comfortable?"

There was no answer.

"I'll have one of your mates sit with you," he said.

Silence.

He went out quietly and shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXVII

"THE funny thing is I can't sleep," Hughes said, "and yet I thought I'd sleep for a whole year, that tired I was."

"I can't sleep either," Donnelly said, "it's what they call re-action."

"Re what?"

"Nothing," Donnelly said, and he went on pulling at the straw in his mouth. They leaned casually against the bulkhead in the port alleyway, Tranter had passed them an hour ago, on his way for a talk with the captain, now he was coming their way again, and they were still there.

"You two still here, can't you find something to do to amuse yourselves?"

"Have you heard how Manion is, sir?" Donnelly asked, jerking the straw from his mouth.

"Oh, he's coming along fine now, I just saw the doctor, he's been in again this morning."

"We're glad about that," Hughes said, stood away from the bulkhead.

Tranter went off again, "Like a couple of faithful dogs," he thought.

"I'm going along to the deck," Hughes said.

"O.K. I'll go with you."

They came out of the alleyway and on to her flush deck, where they leaned on the rail, watching this ship cut through water with the cleanliness of knife thrust, watched the sea grow more blue, and more birds about, saw the land ahead turn from shadow to substance.

"I suppose this chap Manion's got a missus," Hughes said.

"Of course he has," Donnelly said. "I think he calls her Sheila."

"He'd a kid or something, didn't he?" Hughes said.
"Always rambling about a kid named Mike."

"Ah, but he'd two, one was a little girl, I don't know what

he called her?"

"A little girl. They must be big and grown-up now, then."

"Who? He hasn't got any now, I thought you knew that, anyhow."

"No, I didn't. How old d'you reckon Manion is, Donnelly?"

"I should say between fifty and sixty."

"He looks older, though."

"Many men do."

"He seems to have thought a lot about his missus, anyhow," Hughes said, as he spat into the sea.

"The fact is he hasn't got any kids at all now," Donnelly said. "I know he hasn't. The one he called Mike grew up and he went away on a ship and she went down somewhere, but the little girl never grew up at all, died in the reign of Scupper Jack. But he has his missus. *She'll* be there."

"Oh! . . . I see," Hughes said, it came in a sudden burst, he spat into the sea again. "Ah well, we'll soon be home."

"Aye! We'll soon be home."

"What was it that feller Manion used to say to his missus, 'If you can't . . .'"

"If you don't sail away then how can you sail home," Donnelly said, smiling.

"Aye! That's it."

"And there are some men who might have on them the mark of heaven or something no sea will ever get them down, always their heads will be above the water."

"Wonder how he's getting on?" Hughes said.

"He's coming along, don't you worry, he'll be as right as rain in a day or two."

"You know, one time I thought we were just carrying ballast, he looked so near to end," Hughes said.

"There's seven bells, I'm feeling hungry," Donnelly said. "I don't know how you feel."

"I'm hungry all right, needn't worry about that."

"I say, there's the doctor just come out of Manion's cabin again," Donnelly said, moved away from the rail. "Think I'll

nip after him and ask him how the old chap's getting along."

He went along the alleyway and stopped the doctor.

"Yes . . . oh, yes . . ." and "yes," the doctor was saying, mumblingly, he was in a hurry somewhere, "you can sit with him for half an hour this afternoon, if you like," he said.

"Very good, sir. Thank you," Donnelly said, and went back to where Hughes was.

Eight bells rang out sharp and clearly from the bridge.

"That means we eat," Hughes said, turning away from the rail.

They came slowly down the alleyway, stopped outside the cabin where Manion lay.

"I'll just peep in," Donnelly said, moving forward on tiptoe, "just peep in."

Hughes stood waiting, watched the door open quietly, saw his mate look in, and then he stepped inside. He came out as silently as he went in.

"How is he?"

"Fast asleep," Donnelly said. "He's what you call deado, sleeping like kids sleep."

"That's good," Hughes said.

They went on towards the foc'sle. On the point of entering Donnelly said, "I hope there's something good for dinner, don't you?"

"There is," said a voice right behind them. "Roast mutton to-day. How are you chaps feeling now, anyhow," the sailor said. "Christ, you did look a miserable lot that morning we picked you up."

"Did we? What'd we look like?" asked Hughes.

"How's that mate of yours coming on. He looked real nasty when we hauled him up."

"He's fine," Donnelly said, "yes, you can't believe it somehow. But he's getting on nicely, the doctor told me he might be sitting up before we make port."

"Glad to hear that," the sailor said, then roughly, "move for'ard man, you're blocking the passage-way."

"Bloody hell, so I am," and Donnelly burst out laughing. They went into the foc'sle. They sat down at the table on the port side. The peggy served out dinner.

"Reckon we'll get the Light about nine to-night," a man said.

"The Light? What Light?" Donnelly said. He was cutting a slice of bread into small thick cubes.

"Well, there's only one Light to get, and you ought to know what that is. I suppose you're a Western Ocean man," another said, looking straight at Donnelly.

"Yes, that's right," Donnelly said, his voice shaky, as though he had been rudely wakened from dream, from a deep sleep. "Christ! How stupid I am. Of course. The old Light. We needn't call it names, need we?"

"Yes," another sailor said, "and maybe by midnight we'll be packing our bags and shinning off down that gangway."

"Some more potatoes, peggy."

"Some more gravy there?"

"How about another slice of that mutton. It tastes bloody good to me."

They went on eating.

"By Christ, it's good," Hughes said, nudging Donnelly.

"What's that?" Donnelly said.

"I said it's good, the grub is, best feed I've seen in years."

"Oh yes, of course, that's right, yes it is good, isn't it?" Donnelly said.

"Holy smoke," Hughes shouted, "here's a sailor half asleep and dreaming over the best bit of mutton I ever tasted, though it's not as good as the Welsh mutton."

"Are you Welsh, Hughesy," a sailor said, laughing. "A leeky man."

"I'm Welsh all right."

"Your friend's getting better," the diver of the watch said.

"Yes, good and proper, but I never expected it all the same."

"They'll put him into hospital."

" 'Spect they will," Donnelly said, fell silent, but went on quietly eating.

"One of them old-timers, I believe," the diver said.

"Aye! One of them old-timers," Donnelly said. "You never heard such stuff in your life, I mean all the stuff he spit out on the bloody raft. He could talk all right," Donnelly said, half laughing, his mouth full of mutton, "but he's a good sailor-man, what he gabbled about didn't matter to anybody, it was old stuff, an old raft and an old war, this is a new war and the rafts are new. He didn't know what the hell he was talking about half the time. Old stuff, history, twenty-five years ago, might have been a thousand years ago for all it matters now."

The diver of the port watch stared straight across at Donnelly, stopped eating. "I say, shipmate, is that all a man tosses about on a raft for, just to make history?"

"How the hell do I know?" Donnelly said. "Pass the salt."

THE END

